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IN CANADA
FEBRUARY

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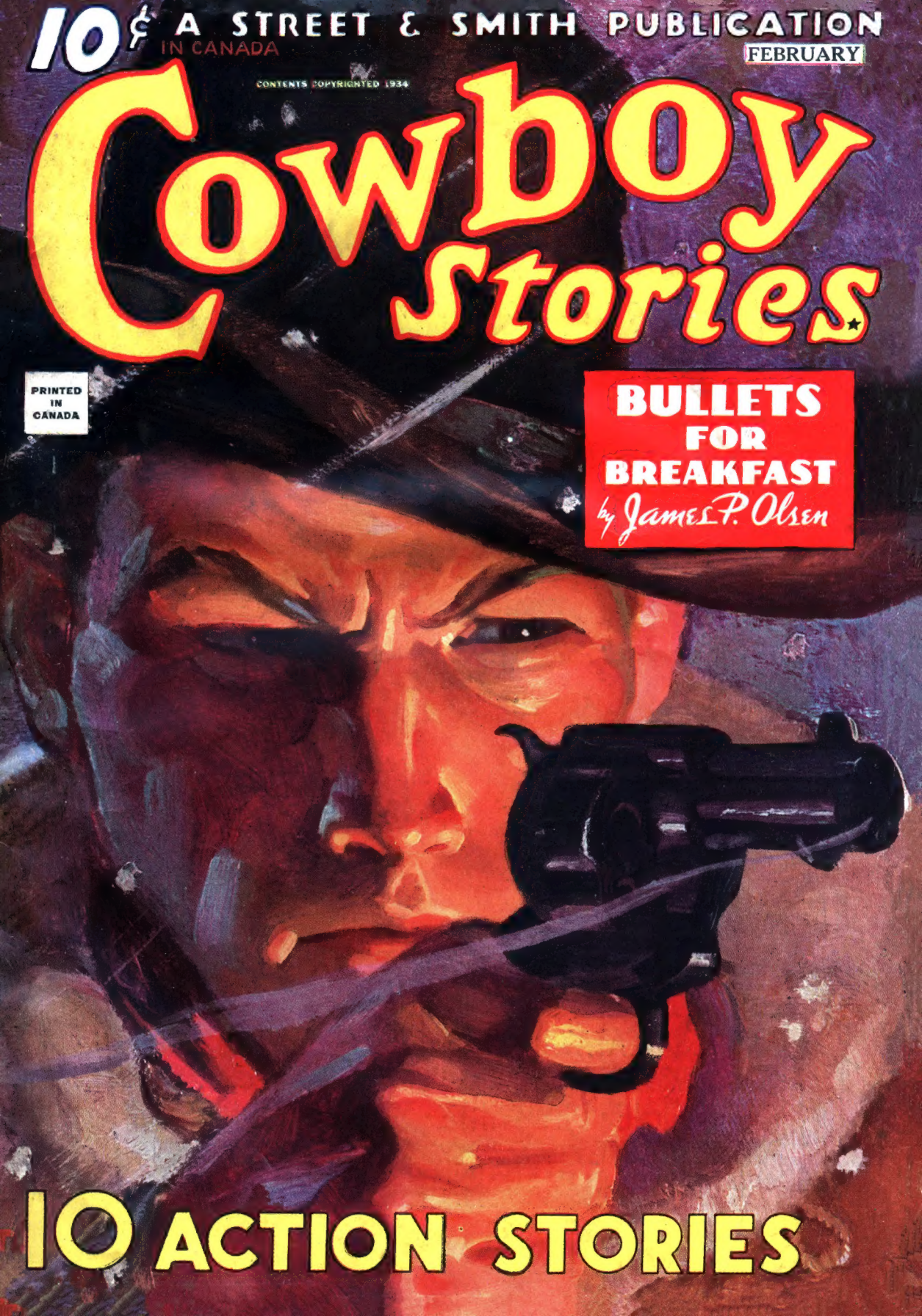
Cowboy Stories

PRINTED IN CANADA

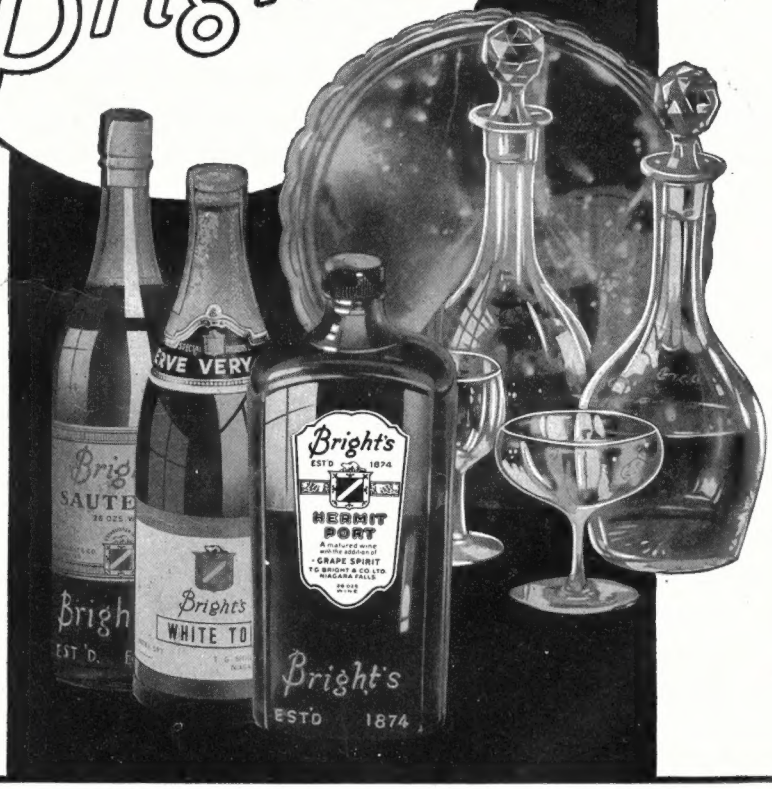
BULLETS FOR BREAKFAST
by James P. Olsen



10 ACTION STORIES

Be Right.. When it's WINE

Say Bright's



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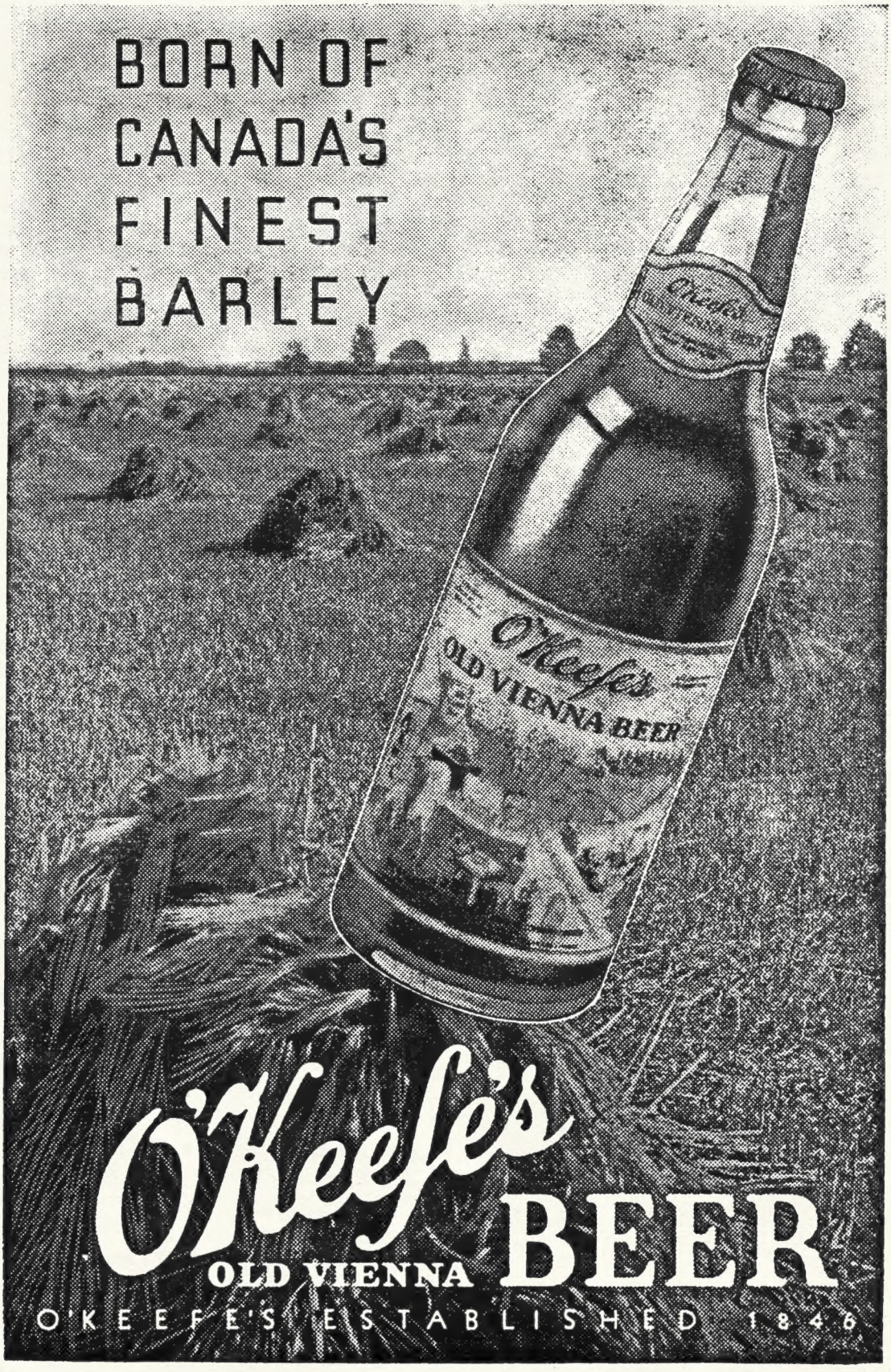
BORN OF
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On Sale First Wednesday of Each Month

Volume XXVII
Number 1

Cowboy Stories

FEBRUARY
1935

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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Dr. O. Z. Rendelle

NOAH WEBSTER thought that COLDS were caused by COMETS

Master scholar, compiler of the great dictionary, Webster was among the first to inquire into the baffling causes of that private and public menace —the common cold.

His conclusion that colds were due to the fearful plunge of meteors through the sky was far from the truth, but no less distant than that of other savants who assigned colds to the bite of bedbugs, and to "sitting in cold, damp churches." (Dr. Thomas Haynes, 1789.)

For centuries, hundreds of absurd theories as to the cause of colds were advanced only to be sharply exploded. But now one has been presented that Science has generally accepted. This is the filtrable virus theory.

Research men say the bacteria of this virus are so small the microscope cannot see them, so tiny they cannot be trapped by the most selective filters. Only by their harmful effect on the human body can their existence be established. With such a virus, scientists have repeatedly inoculated others with one person's cold.

At the first sign of a cold

Granting that colds are due to a virus that enters the mouth, nose and throat, is it not a wise precautionary measure to use a good antiseptic to fight such bacteria? Is it not wisdom to keep the oral cavity clean and healthy? Noted physicians tell us that it is. Millions of people find that it is.

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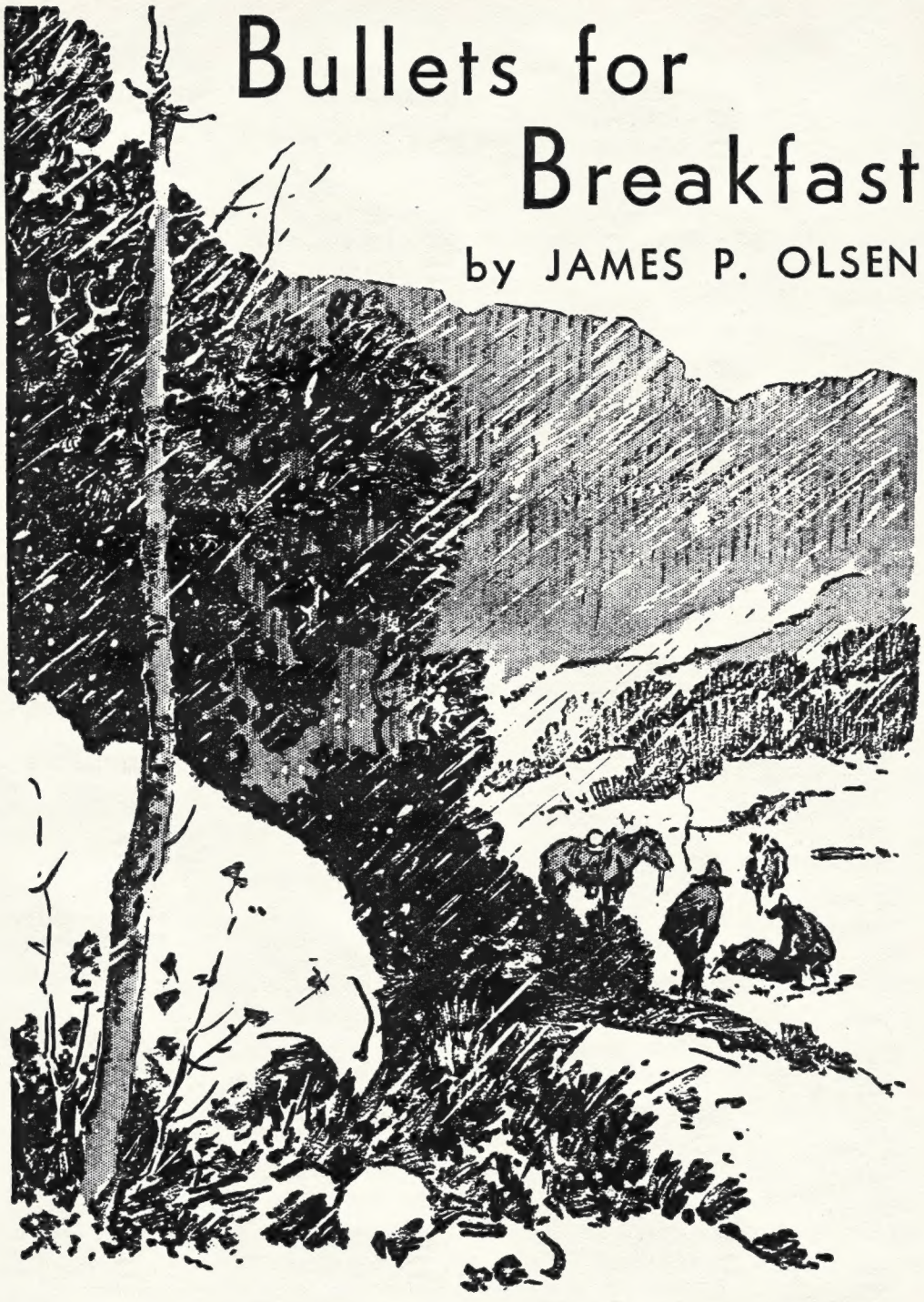
LISTERINE fights Colds and Sore Throat

MADE IN CANADA

Bullets for Breakfast

by JAMES P. OLSEN



An action novel of the range country that gets under your skin—and bites!

VAGUELY UNEASY, seeming a stranger amid the very scenes he'd known so well, Britt Allaman was coming home. The wild urging that had driven him from the Canadas to Mexico, from Oregon to the Dakotas, had burned suddenly, unexplicably out, leaving ashes of longing gray within him.

It wasn't the fanned-flame feeling that sometimes had possessed Britt Allaman—those occasions when his dark countenance had jerked to the beat of his gun; those times when trigger terrors had tried him and had too late found him best.

Nor was it the wild mood that, in times past, had run him from round-up to rustlers' camp; from deputy to outlaw; from wolf to wild-horse hunter. Nor the mood that made him of the lobo tribe: those who run alone from choice. Silent, his moods running deep and obscure, Britt Allaman, perhaps, had never found himself.

He was twenty-three when he and his dad, "Silent" Allaman, had fallen out. Fault on one side, and fault equally on the other. Britt Allaman never savvied his father, nor had Silent thought a young cowhand needed himself to be savvied. The usual cussing and recriminations, and Britt Allaman had ridden off.

Lots of water, gunpowder, pay off, and pain pass under, over and above life's bridge in the span of five years. And then, one night when the geese honked in the dark above, when the bears were foraging desperately for those last ounces of hibernating fat, Britt Allaman had leaped up from his lonesome camp fire high in the dark Cascades. He was going home. No waiting. No reasoning why. He threw saddle on his rangy gray gelding and hit for Idaho.

And here he was, still vague, unreasonably uneasy, and not knowing why he had returned. Britt Allaman did not know the sickness by name; the sickness that is a magnet, drawing the pilgrim backward to the nearly forgotten place called home.

A hundred yards from the old ranch house, he reined up. The first fall rains slanted through the early dark, picking at his hat brim and dripping down his back. He squinted narrowly against the cold offering of Pluvius at the lamplight gleaming from the house. No lights from the windows of the bunk house, and a windmill screeched protest and hunger for oil. It was dismal. It wasn't as he'd expected. Well—what had he expected? Damned if he could say!

Nights like this made him reminisce. Things would come back to him; things he'd forgotten. That protesting windmill, now. And the cold rain. Unbidden, a picture played on his mind's screen: Another squealing windmill and rainy night. In Colorado, nearly three years back. He was a deputy that night—and two months later he'd been on the owl-hoot trail for the pure hell of it, and the hell of his nature itself.

He and others had lain in wait. Moving cattle. Dark forms of riders. Riders that were rustlers. Gun flame infuriated the night. The windmill screamed like a howling, gibbering ghost. Well, that gang had been broken up. Britt remembered one rustler. Too good-looking, big and blond, and a back-crawling snake. He'd spilled his tale, and got off.

FUNNY Britt should think of this now. He cursed gloomily and rode on to the stable. There were empty stalls a-plenty. Yes, and loose

boards on stalls and walls, and rain leaking through the roof. The stable needed cleaning, and the door hung loosely on a single rusted hinge.

So, Silent Allaman had slipped, eh? Couldn't make 'er when Britt wasn't there to act as cow boss, roustabout, and general cowpoke-do-it-all. Britt derived some grim satisfaction from this thought, and then cussed himself for still being a kid in certain ways.

The front porch when he stepped upon it groaned and a loose board flipped up and struck him on the knee. "Huddem it to hell!" Britt roared.

He ripped the offending board up, cussed angrily in rhythm to the cry of rusted nails, and hurled it far out into the yard.

The front door opened. A girl stood in the light flicked out by the lamp at her back. The light made a soft halo around her piled, honey-colored hair. Browned bare arms, womanly breast, and deep eyes that flashed more scorn than anger.

"Damn sonuvagoat oughta fix—uh?"

Mouth agape, his brows shooting scalpward quizzically, surprisedly, Britt Allaman eyed the girl; then scowled. She had no business on Rafter-A, and less business walking up on a man when he was feeling like this. Nor did he like the show of scorn she gave.

She said, red lips curling: "At least you have the grace to be ashamed. I wonder if you're man enough to apologize?"

"For what? Me? I don't like women. I've got along plumb handsome without 'em in the past, an' I'll continue to do the same."

"You'll get along with me, Britt Allaman," the girl snapped. "If you'll come inside, stop your cursing, and bridle your hideous temper, I'll explain to you why—*little boy!*"

That last emphasized barb pricked a raw spot. Yet Britt did not answer, nor choke her as he felt inclined to do. She knew his name and said he'd have to get along with her. Hell—had his dad, old Silent, gone and married a girl-button like this? Old fool! Well, Britt could leave. Already he was sorry he had come.

He followed the girl into the familiar front room. His mood now was not one that the old things gave him a pang. Nothing, that is, save the old organ. His mother used to sit there. He could just remember it now. Silent would sit and listen to that long-stilled, dear voice. He'd hold little Britt on his lap. Why—why Britt had never figured it that way before. His sire had been different then. After his mother died, and the organ and the old songs no longer filled the house at night——

"Oh, hell!" Britt Allaman groaned.

The girl, eyes flashing, wheeled about. Her parted red lips closed over an intended reprimand. Her face softened, and something suspiciously akin to moisture dampened her lids. Britt's words had not been a curse, but the prayerful elegy over something that is revealed to poor blind eyes of youth too late to be of use.

The man's face, usually hard, suspicious, because his ways had built this upon him, and his word had demanded it to be so, was quivery with old pain. He was staring at the little organ, and now reached forth a hand—that terrible right hand with the gun callous on the thumb and touched the old-fashioned thing.

"I'm sorry," the girl whispered, her voice choked.

She was seeing another side of

Britt Allaman—a side no other woman had ever viewed before; and now another side.

Britt Allaman wheeled on her savagely. "Sorry for what?" he rasped, the hard mask upon his face again. "Who are you to offer me sympathy?"

"You need it, Britt Allaman. You need sympathy and understanding more than any man I've ever known."

Head high, she marched out and toward the kitchen. Britt followed, vaguely disturbed and not clear in his mind as to what she meant.

IN THE kitchen, a querulous, stooped old man looked at Britt, arose, offered his hand.

Britt scowled. "Who are you? An' where's my dad?" he demanded.

The old fellow looked at his refused hand, scratched his head and blinked rheumily at the girl. Angrily she faced Britt.

"That is my uncle. We call him Pap—Pap Lowrie. I'm Louellen Lowrie. And your father, Britt Allaman, has been dead two years."

Britt's countenance never altered. Oh, he felt it inside; but it was a blow time already had deadened.

"Oh, I see! You bought the place," Britt mumbled. "How did you know me——"

"I've heard you spoken of, by your father, and others. Your wild temper, your disregard of others is known. In the past two years, we've even heard of your reputation for hardness and wildness. That's how I knew you. On the porch, you introduced yourself all true to form.

"As to the second question: No; we don't own Rafter-A. Not yet. Pap and I came here when your father began failing. We helped him when his own son had left him, a broken old man. It was your father's wish that you have Rafter-A. In his will he provided: If you returned within three years after his death, and within a year showed yourself willing to build up the ranch, curb your temper, and consider others than yourself, you get the place. If you don't, we get it."

"An' I come back a year too soon!" Britt jeered. "Who's gonna see that I build up the place, that I curb my temper, an' go around gettin' stepped on by somebody else?"

The girl smiled—a freezing, slow grimace that made Britt snarl. "I am. And I'll see that you do it, too!" she said.

"Heh-heh!" "Pap" chuckled. "She'll be a right hard boss, Britt boy. Louellen runs us all——"

"Shut up!" Britt thundered. "Nothin' in pants can run me. I damn sure ain't goin' to have no woman wagon boss ramroddin' me. You can have Rafter-A. Take it an' go to the devil. An' you call me 'boy' again, I'll forget you're a dodderin' old corn farmer an' choke you near to death!"

"Brave! He vents his vicious temper on women and old men." Withering—no other word for the cut of Louellen's voice. "Brave, and bad. And not man enough to stick, conquer himself, and do a man's work. Well, we can use the place——"

"*You!*" Britt stormed. "I'll show you! I'll stick, an' I'll kick you off with your hot rolls spillin' when the year is up. A woman boss, eh? Try bossin' me. I'm stayin', an' to hell with it!"

Louellen turned her head. A big grin spread her red lips, and she wanted to chuckle aloud. She had the way of it now.

Another element, and a disturbing one, gave red tone to the situation

now. The kitchen door slammed back and a man stamped in. His face was flushed, his eyes liquor-lighted. " 'S helluva night," he pettishly complained. He was a big man, blond, and too good-looking; somehow furtive, and not to be trusted.

"My cousin, Kiggy Jedrow," Louellen introduced.

"Kiggy" Jedrow's Adam's apple jerked. His outlet breath hissed gaspingly. And Britt Allaman—now wasn't this just too strange! For here was the man he'd thought of not very long before; the blond no-guts who'd got off in Colorado that time by squealing on his pals. Sure! Britt had been a deputy then. But he hated Kiggy Jedrow because he'd got off; and, paradoxically, because he'd been false to the long-lane code.

Britt's hand fell toward his gun.

II.

"KILLER! Stop it!"

The half-drawn gun, the .45 that swung ever at Britt's hip, remained half drawn. And a slow, mocking thinness compressed Kiggy's lips. Britt turned his head, and Louellen Lowrie felt it would have been better had he shown rage. He showed triumph and contempt.

"I don't shoot them that're too weak to draw when I make a play for my gun," he jeered.

The girl lowered the shotgun she'd grabbed up and thrust against Britt's spine. She was trembling. "You try to egg Kiggy into a gun-fight, I'll shoot you," she threatened, sadly dispassionate.

"Kiggy!" Britt made sport, a curse of the name. "Did Kiggy tell you about the time——"

"We know. He wasn't aware they were rustlers when he rode."

"Nor that you were Britt Allaman when I came here six months ago!" Kiggy Jedrow hoarsely offered.

"I never sleep in the house with fools, coyotes, or them that act so damn big an' got relatives so sneakin' low!" Britt lashed them.

Yet he felt no pang, no rise of triumph, either, when the girl flushed deeply crimson and bowed her head. The door slammed, and Britt Allaman drove head-down through the cold rain. Shortly after, Louellen Lowrie saw a lamp lighted in the bunk house.

And Britt Allaman had come home—a bitter, dark man; an ex-outlaw, officer, cowboy, roamer, and gunman; cynical, harsh, and many other things. Yes, Louellen told herself; other things. Under it all, a man. She remembered as he stood by his mother's old organ, there in the living room.

BREAKFAST was an uneasy affair. Kiggy Jedrow squirmed under Britt's baleful gaze.

Turning to Louellen, Britt snarled: "Does this yellowback figger to stay on this ranch?"

"Not only figures, he is staying," she quietly informed him. "Kiggy needs a chance. That's all. No. Don't say it. Remember, you are to curb your temper. And I am to be the judge. Eat your breakfast. Then you and I will look around. There may be things you want to do."

"Yeah," Britt mumbled, glaring at Kiggy. "There is things I want to do. An' if he gets under my feet, by damn I'll do 'em!"

"You'll cease your cursing," she calmly informed him. "I am not forced to cook for you, you know." She smiled. "After all, a lady is entitled to some consideration from a gentleman."

"If you was a lady, you'd not cook for a yellowbelly cousin," Britt sneered. "An' I ain't a gentleman. Not for you or nobody! To hell with bein' a gent. I'm me, an' that's plenty!"

"Lookie here, Britt," Pap protested. "You can't say Lou' ain't a lady. I won't have it. You hear?"

"You damned old pauper, you ain't tellin' me what I can say. You move in on my place, fool my old man, an' then—— Aw, hell!"

He slammed a plate of potatoes to the floor, kicked back his chair and stood quivering above them. "*Arrrr!*" he ground out. Then seized an egg that had been fried sunny side up and—*plop!* The egg took Pap Lowrie squarely between the eyes.

Britt stalked out. Looked back as he went through the door. He chuckled like a small boy at the spluttering picture Pap made. And then he felt uneasily ashamed and cussed himself for feeling so. Louellen had her head down on her shapely brown arms. Great sobs caused her shoulders to shake.

Britt left bursts of smoke trailing in the heavy wet air as he strode toward the corrals, puffing jerkily on his cigarette. He noted the disrepair of the corral, the outbuildings; gazed across the flat range toward the Bitter Root Mountains, now a gray line far eastward. Here and there ranged small bunches of cattle. Southward of Rafter-A lay the broken, half-timbered valley and hills known as Little Lost, and to the west, beyond a timbered ridge, was the outfit of old "Woof" Dean, the Leaning D.

Rafter-A, once paying and proud among neighboring spreads, was now a decrepit, shoddy beggar on its last decline; empty bunk house, meager amount of stock on the range; decay, dissolution, and disrepair. It would take work, and lots of it, to build back. And the contemplation of this work brought to Britt Allaman some sort of satisfaction. It would be a fight wherein results would be worth the uphill battle.

He leaned against the sagging corral, moodily calculating things that would be needed for repairs—lumber, wire, nails.

"There's a bit of money in the bank. I'll write checks for what you think you'll need. I'm sending Pap into Little Lost to try to find some yearlings that are missing. Kiggy has to go somewhere on business of his own."

Standing at his elbow, Louellen startled Britt. He hadn't heard her come up. "Money—an' I gotta draw from you!" he growled. "An' you, a she boss, send that old fossil to chase out stuff a-missin'. An' as for Kiggy, well, farther he keeps from underfoot, longer he's likely to live."

"Please! There are things you must know." She laid a small hand on his arm; a little hand that was work-worn, Britt noticed. "Can't you be a bit reasonable? I'd like to ride to Shellerton with you to-day—that is, if you're taking the wagon in for supplies."

"Oh, all right!" Britt ungraciously assented.

She smiled and ran toward the house. Britt went to the tool shed. Pap swore squeakily as he labored at greasing the wagon. Britt shoved him aside.

"Get a team, if there is such a thing on this loco spread."

"Reckon a few old crowbaits is the only thing that ain't disappearing," Pap declared as he hobbled toward the stable.

ROCKING on the seat beside Britt, Louellen Lowrie talked. "Pap and I had a small place down in Little Lost. Bought it when we sold out in Oklahoma. But we had to sell to a man named Pentro. Came here to work for your father.

"After your father died, I tried to find you. Things had started going wrong. Cattle have disappeared, and the calf crop is not half what it should be. Buck Dean says his father, Woof, is also losing cattle. And Buck says Rafter-A brand is only on about a hundred head right now."

She stared at the gray sky line. "I'd hoped you'd have more to come home to——"

"You was hopin' I'd be so disgusted I'd walk right off!" Britt charged.

He was flaming mad. And couldn't have told why. He was mad at "Buck" Dean. So Buck Dean had been advising her, had he? Buck, with his years at college. He and Britt had never got on too well.

The girl didn't answer Britt's accusation. She clenched her little hands together in her lap. Mittened hands, the mittens thin and darned in many spots, Britt noted.

"I—I thought Kiggy would help, when he came to stay," she said after a while. "He tries. But a girl can't handle things."

"Kiggy—hell!" Britt snarled, lashing out at the team.

The team ran, down through a rocky pass across a flat and into Shellerton. Town hadn't changed in five years, that Britt could see; same old buildings; same two saloons. A new sign over one announcing it to be now the Card House. Kiggy Jedrow's horse stood before it. The girl turned her head, pretending not to see.

Britt stopped, jumped down. The girl held out her hands. The sight of those ragged little mittens again caused Britt to scowl. He reached up to help her. Did she slip? She lay for a moment against his chest. The clean smell of her, like wind and rain-washed sage, pleased him. Her tiny hands clutched his arms.

"You're strong," she whispered confidentially.

Her breath tickled his ear. When he left her and walked down the street, he swaggered even more than was his wont. He looked back, then dived headlong into Ma Morris' tiny Ladies' Store. He bought tiny gloves and looked at a coat. He lacked funds for that coat. He tucked the gloves inside his shirt and went out to stand on the walk and finger the few bills left in his pocket.

He grinned. Make those bills get more bills. He walked toward the Card House.

"Fool!" he condemned himself. "But I'd buy a blanket for a shiverin' wolf I didn't like," he lied.

He was in a mixed, combative mood when he kicked open the doors of the Card House and jingled inside.

Kiggy Jedrow was standing at the bar. And the man with him, pressing glass after glass of whisky upon the half-drunken Kiggy, was none other than Buck Dean. At the same time, a door in the rear was opened, and a heavy man with a milky left eye came in.

"Jedrow, you've had enough!" the man snapped.

It appeared to Britt that Kiggy sobered instantly. Did this fellow have him some place where the hair was short? Buck Dean scowled, but said nothing. The fellow came on up, stopped before Britt.

"You're Britt Allaman, eh? My name's Scarva. I own this place."

"Ain't braggin', are you?" Britt snarled.

Scarva's face got hard. He stepped back. Britt stood still, facing him. There was one hell of a lot about this he didn't like. The room was ominously close and quiet. There was Buck Dean, a crooked set to his lips, by the bar, Kiggy Jedrow, slowly backing away down the room. And now another man took chips in the play.

He stepped halfway between Scarva and Britt. "I'm Coyne," he growled, indicating that the name should mean something to Britt.

It did not. Coyne's attitude, his way of wearing his gun, did, however, indicate a lot. Other things were pointers, too. This play had been fixed. They'd set a stage against his coming here. Somebody wanted Britt Allaman out of the way and was losing no time to that end.

"I'm Coyne," the other again growled. "An' when you ask somebody if they're braggin', think of yourself. You, lettin' a heifer steal your place an' ramrod you. She's just a little——"

"Stop beggin' for it!" Britt roared. "Take it!"

A bang of overturned chairs, scraping boots. The chill slap of hard palms to harder gun butts. Whisper of metal against leather, and then the roar of guns. Britt Allaman heard one roar and knew they'd both fired at once. Yes; Coyne had been fast; had been. Now, on tiptoes, Coyne was plunging toward the floor.

Britt Allaman was spun half around. Something slapped him hard and seared across his chest. He cursed and fought to regain his balance. His face harsh, he spun on Scarva. Scarva was a picture of concentrated hate. He was backed against the wall, hands shoulder-high. Buck Dean's gun poked his ribs.

"I'm with you, Britt," Buck ground out.

"Yeah?" Britt panted. "I wonder —if you—are?"

III.

COYNE was laid out on a pool table in the back. Blood frothed and bubbled on his lips as his chest rose and fell laboredly. Men came spilling through the door. Buck Dean passed Scarva a suggestive look and holstered his gun. Britt Allaman buttoned his coat tightly about him. The scratch on his chest —— To hell with giving them the satisfaction of knowing he'd been creased!

Old Woof Dean, Buck's dad, came in on the heels of Sheriff Goff. "I heard you was back, Britt," Woof said. "But I didn't think you'd get into a scrape so soon. Why'n hell don'tcha ever get over——"

"Coyne begged for it," Buck interposed.

"I'll handle my own end. You keep out," Britt warned.

Buck looked at him oddly. Goff asked questions, of Scarva.

"I reckon, maybe, Coyne did ask for it, talkin' about a girl like that," Scarva sullenly, bleakly, admitted, his one good eye hot with hate.

Goff walked back to where the doctor was working over Coyne, came back.

Woof said: "Reckon, if that's how she lays, you ain't holdin' Britt, Goff."

"Reckon not," Goff decided.

"I don't need your help, Woof," Britt declared.

Damn them, did they think he was going to swallow this? Now that the other play had failed, they

wanted, for some reason, to play the pal act. Huh!

Britt turned on his heel and stalked out. At the wagon, Louellen waited. She looked at him accusingly, angrily.

"I heard it," she choked. "You used me as an excuse to start trouble. Your vicious, wild nature includes killing—or seriously wounding."

"He used your name to egg me on," Britt snarled, stung by her words and manner. "Not that I'd fight for you one little bit. It was just that he asked for trouble. He talked too much——"

"But he won't talk no more," said Buck Dean, coming up. "Coyne just now kicked off, Britt. An' a damned fine job you did!"

He bowed low to Louellen. She nodded. Britt became more angered.

Buck turned back to him. "Woof an' me would like to talk to you, Britt—business."

"You know where Rafter-A is," Britt retorted.

He climbed into the wagon. His chest burned as though a hot branding iron lay against it. Yet Britt Allaman was too stubborn to let them know he was hurt. He jerked his head toward the girl. She hesitated, then climbed up beside him.

People on the street stopped and turned heads, watching Britt out of town. So wild Britt Allaman was all they'd heard he was during the five years he'd been away. Britt, in time, would hear that opinion, and his dark mood would grow upon him. Hell of a home-coming he was getting. Why not tell them off to hell and ride away from here? And let this female have Rafter-A? Damned if he would!

The ride home was a silent one. Louellen sat forlornly as far away from Britt as she could. To Britt, it seemed each succeeding mile grew longer. He shook his head savagely. Things were beginning to blur and dance and undulate before his heated eyes. He sat rigid and unspeaking, lips a thin line in a face gone pale. He did not know when the team stopped at the stable. He heard, faint and far away, the screech of the windmill.

Still he sat there on the seat. Louellen waited for him to move and turned wonderingly when he did not. "Why—why you're ill!" she gasped.

"Naw." And Britt tumbled backward into the wagon bed.

He did not know when Pap and the girl did a heroic job of getting him into the house and to bed. There was a telephone at Leaning D, and Pap rode like a wild man to call the doctor. Louellen ripped off Britt's caked, sodden shirt, exposing the furrow across his chest; exposing something else, too:

A pair of tiny gloves—gloves now stiff with Britt's blood; one of them minus a finger where the bullet had plowed it off. It might have been that pair of gloves that saved Britt Allaman's life.

As she stood there with them in her hands, Britt feverishly mumbled: "Those mittens are all ragged. An' she needs a coat. Poor girl-button! But I wouldn't let her know it, I never would!"

Tears coursed down Louellen's cheeks as she worked over him. And over and over she sobbed: "God forgive me! I was wrong."

WITHIN the week, Britt Allaman was up, out, and in the saddle again; stiff, with a temper like a sore bear's. Pap and Kiggy stayed away from him. Kiggy was gone most of the time—luckily for him.

To-day, with a raw wind coursing

out of the north, Britt rode the range. A few late calves ran unbranded with Rafter-A cows. Britt rode far, circling back toward the broken country toward Little Lost. And he learned that Buck Dean had it right when he said hardly more than a hundred head carried Rafter-A brand.

He came across plenty of Leaning D stock, and began wondering things that were not so good: Why had Buck Dean taken the trouble to check so closely on Rafter-A? And what was that business he'd spoken of in town? Yes—and why in hell had Buck Dean been pouring whisky into Kiggy Jedrow?

To act on impulse was the way of Britt Allaman. He turned his rangy gray and cut obliquely across the range. He stopped once, three miles from home, to water his horse and spell himself from the wind in the timber along Maverick Creek. Some one else recently had stopped here. Ashes of a fire in the lee of a cut-bank was the sign. And there were tracks of horses and men—and cattle.

Idly, Britt kicked among the ashes of the fire. Cursed, then, low and bitterly, as he stooped and retrieved something he had kicked out. Some one had lost a running iron in the fire and ridden off and left it. A running iron in a stamping-iron country; tracks in this sheltered place!

Stony-faced, Britt got his horse and followed the tracks. They went angling southward toward Little Lost country and the southeast line of Woof Dean's Leaning D. A mile, and the tracks played out, lost in a rocky ravine that cut his trail.

A lot of things boiled within Britt's head as he again rode homeward. Was Louellen actually glad he was back? He could not at all figure why she should be. The place would go to her if he did not stay, or make good. Make good? Was that it? Was it set that he couldn't pull Rafter-A through the crisis?

Kiggy, now—surely she couldn't be so blind as not to know he was a first-water coyote, even though he was her cousin. And there was the way Buck Dean and Louellen spoke to each other.

"Hell—I got it!" Britt croaked and trimmed his gray with heavy spurs.

THERE WERE horses standing by the corral—Leaning D horses. And as Britt stiffly dismounted, old Woof Dean and Buck came from the house. They met him by the stable.

"We came over to see you about sellin' Rafter-A," Woof said. "Miss Lowrie says she'll pass the deal if you think it's what's best."

"You see, Britt, I'm gettin' married soon, an' I want a place of my own," Buck Dean explained.

"I see you do," Britt replied with heavy sarcasm. "You want it so bad you're stealin' the place blind. Don't deny it, damn you! I come across proof to-day. An' it is you an' this Lowrie woman, aimin' to get——"

"Proof! Proof?" Woof bristled.

"Proof!" Britt snapped. "On Maverick Crick. I found tracks, leadin' toward your place. An' in a fire, I found this!" He pulled the running iron from his pocket and shoved it under Woof's nose.

"Your play in town, actin' friendly, didn't work, Dean. An' now let me tell *you* somethin': Stay off Rafter-A. Keep hands off Rafter-A beef. I'm ridin' night an' day, an' I'm goin' armed."

"Don't be a fool, Britt," Buck protested. "There's things you can't

understand; things none of us can get to the bottom of yet. We got to work together——"

"I said—get off—this place!"

Britt pushed the words past set teeth. He stiffened and his right arm crooked at the elbow. Woof swore luridly, Buck glared at Britt; but they both got their horses and rode.

Britt wheeled. Louellen was standing behind him, her face very white.

"You aren't boss of this place, Britt Allaman," she said. "You've no right to tell those men to leave. Don't forget that."

"I'll forget what I please. If you think you can sandy me out of this place, turn it over to Buck Dean and then marry him, you got two more thinks a-comin'."

Louellen's eyes got very wide and round. "Me? Me marry Buck Dean? Why—why it's laughable! Buck Dean's engaged to marry the school-teacher at the head of Maverick Creek. I thought you knew."

"Then who are you goin' to marry?"

She sighed, shook her head. "The man I may some day marry is somewhat of an enigma," she told him. "I'm afraid you wouldn't understand him."

"Nor want to!" Britt snapped.

He strode to the house ahead of her. She smiled at his broad back as she followed.

He sat down at the kitchen table, moodily lost in thought. Pap was out somewhere. Kiggy had ridden off long before.

As the girl set food before Britt, she said: "Britt, I wish you'd forget old scores and help me with Kiggy. Make him go to work. I know you think me foolish, but he's my mother's sister's boy, and—well, please try to understand."

"Why don't you tell your man? The one you aim to marry, an' who I wouldn't understand?" Britt growlingly demanded.

She came close to him then, held out work-worn little hands. "I'm telling him now, Britt," she said softly.

Britt Allaman dropped his fork. And did something he'd wanted to do; something he'd been too stubborn to admit he wanted to do. That damned rotten nature of his —— He grabbed her.

Pap, coming in, backed hastily out and eased the door shut. He whistled then, and stamped his feet and reëntered. Faces flushed, Louellen's eyes starry, the pair tried innocence —and looked guilty.

IV.

BRITT ALLAMAN loomed out of the fine drizzle and brought his gray to a stop before the Card House. He wondered at himself. Two days ago, he was bitter, sullen, like a snapping dog. To-day, he was coming to Shellerton to hunt Kiggy Jedrow out and take him back to the ranch.

He hated Kiggy; knew he was a skunk. Yet he'd told the girl he'd try. Yes; and he'd gain satisfaction from the effort. He'd kick Kiggy's errant tail from A to Izzard if he didn't step!

It was almost the same scene as on that other day. Kiggy was at the bar, and so was Buck Dean. This time, though, Buck wasn't pouring whisky into Kiggy. Kiggy was drinking, and Scarva seemed not to mind.

Britt swallowed his stubbornness and walked up to Buck. "I was mebbe wrong the other day," he offered.

"Sure, Britt!" Buck answered af-

fably. "You got enough of a hard row ahead to make you touchy." He lowered his voice. "I want to congratulate you. That Louellen is a fine little lady. An' she's worked like hell to hold your place up. It'd be a shame if either of you had to leave." He chuckled. "Reckon you won't, now."

"How'd you know?" Britt demanded.

Buck scowled toward Kiggy. "He's shootin' off his face. Seems he can shoot it off about ever'thing but what I suspect. I've done poured my last whisky down his throat. Scarva, I reckon, has got him so he won't blab, even when he's stewed."

"You think Scarva might, mebbe, be behind whoever left that runnin' iron on Maverick Crick? Behind cattle comin' up lost?"

"I swear I don't know," Buck replied. "I got ideas, but they don't jell. Them cow brutes an' calves is goin' somewhere; an' somebody is doin' it. It ain't you, an' it ain't us, even if you did have ideas to that effect."

Britt opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. "Kiggy's goin' to earn his keep from now on!" he snarled. "He won't have time to do no runnin' around."

He wheeled and strode to the bar. Scarva snarled at him and stepped back. The barkeep, a paunchy, pock-faced pot of blubber who stank of cheap pomade, was setting out a glass of whisky for Kiggy. Britt grabbed Kiggy's shoulder, hurled him aside, and smacked the glass off the bar.

"No more of that!" Britt thundered. "You're ridin' with me. You're gonna ride line, fix fence, help brand up them calves that should 'a' been ironed on long ago. By gosh, fella, you're gonna go to work."

"I'll work when I please," Kiggy returned defiantly. "You ain't goin' to shoot me, either. You do, an' where'll you be with Lou', eh?"

He grinned slyly and stepped back to the bar. Britt turned on the barkeep.

"You feed him one more drink, an' I'll pour you so full of your own slop you'll spill over," he warned.

The barkeep looked at Scarva. Scarva nodded. The barkeep set out bottle and glasses.

Buck Dean said at Britt's elbow: "I'll keep an eye on Scarva. Go ahead!"

Britt nodded. He reached across the bar and grabbed the barkeep by the purple tie he wore. Twisted it, cracking the man's face with the heel of his hand when he tried for a gun beneath the bar. Slowly, slowly then, he dragged him up, across the bar and dropped him to the floor upon his back. The barkeep sobbed and sucked in a gasping breath—started to. The neck of a full quart of whisky was shoved halfway down his throat.

"Gulp, damn you, gulp!" Britt snarled savagely. He knelt on the barkeep's stomach and with his free hand shoved his gun against the man's head.

The few men in the place stood and looked on with eyes big, staring, and sick. The barkeep made gulping, horsy noises and continued to swallow until the bottle was drained.

Britt reached back and waved his hand. "Another'n, Buck," he called.

"No—no!" the barkeep wailed.

His opened mouth was closed by the neck of the second quart. Some onlooker gagged and beat it for the door. The barkeep groaned, choked,

strained, closed his eyes, and squeezed great tears from under the lids. It grew very, very quiet.

"There, damn it!" Britt exclaimed, getting up.

The barkeep got to his knees, pitched sideways, and snored lustily. Not bad now. But when he woke up about twenty-four hours later, he——

"You'll make an ante for this." Scarva cursed. "A big ante."

"Open the pot. We'll play," Buck invited.

"I'll open it in my own way. When I do, I'll win."

Britt left Buck to argue with Scarva. He grabbed Kiggy by the neck, flipped his gun from the holster, turned him about and rushed him howling toward the door. The smack of Britt's foot on the seat of Kiggy's pants reverberated in howls of laughing derision from all—but Scarva—who saw.

A few minutes later, Kiggy rode out of town toward Rafter-A. A roaring gun in Britt's hands made Kiggy duck this way and that in frantic spasms of sheer terror.

Britt Allaman was taking Kiggy home.

FROM A POINT on a timbered rise, Britt watched the horseman working out the draws and pockets below him. A bleak bitterness indicative of stark rage and no little pain etched Britt's cold-pinched face. Spits of snow came down with the drizzle, and the lowering, full-bellied gray sky was as dark as Britt's mood.

Again he raised his glasses to his eyes and focused them on the rider below him, Kiggy. And Kiggy was driving cows and calves out of a brushy pocket in the Little Lost where it touched the flatter range. Britt fingered his rifle, muttered to himself, and decided to wait.

From his eminence he could see into the narrow, winding niche down which the dozen cows and eight or nine calves were driven. Could see, then, the brush corral in a deeper pocket below. Kiggy herded the little band in, dismounted and piled brush across the opening. He looked around and then rode hastily away.

For half a mile, Britt kept him in sight with his glasses. At a lone cottonwood, its bare branches like skeleton fingers twisting imploringly to heaven for a covering of soft snow, Kiggy again dismounted. He knelt, reached into a hole formed by above-ground roots of the tree.

Britt saw him pull a quart bottle from the hole, uncork it, drink deeply. So that was how the coyote had been keeping drunk during this last week, while Britt was riding him hard and trying to make him work!

Something, a piece of paper, fluttered in Kiggy's hands. He bent his head as though reading, and then he shoved it into his chaps pocket. He rode out of sight. Britt debated. Should he go down and run those cows and calves, carrying Rafter-A and Leaning D brands, back onto the range? Yes; and three of those calves wore no brands or earmarks at all. Britt hadn't got around to making Rafter-A property of those mavericks yet. Yeah! Kiggy, taking his time all up.

And Louellen, too. Begging him not to be rough with Kiggy. Louellen, claiming she wanted him to hold his temper; that it'd be a great lesson in self-restraint. Dammit, a woman didn't understand! Nor did she understand why Britt was daily becoming more and more irritable. under the strain.

"Well, if what I know is proved, Kiggy takes it!" Britt swore aloud. "If she loved me, she wouldn't ask so much. I ain't tied to her apron strings—not yet! I'm gonna be me. If she don't like it that way, to hell with it!"

The more he thought of it, the angrier he became. He could not get along with Louellen and do as she asked in regards to giving Kiggy a chance, glove-handling and decent shakes. Nor could he be expected, ever, to pull Rafter-A through in such circumstances.

Something of the old darkness shot through him then. He made a decision as he lay there in the increasing fall of snow. He'd do as he damned well pleased. And he wouldn't give her a chance to say she'd been mistaken; a chance to tell him he'd failed his old man's terms and must slope. He'd bust this thing wide open and hit the trail on his own!

Britt suddenly ceased his angry mumbling. At first a blot, then a definite form in the white, swirling curtain pulling from the clouds to the range, a horse and rider came cautiously down a draw and stopped beside the brush corral.

Slowly, his eyes gimlet bits of brightness, Britt squinted down his rifle sights. The man below him looked around, hesitated, and then rode straight toward the rise whereon Britt Allaman was ensconced. His features were now distinct and readable. That man was Buck Dean.

Buck Dean, and his face was hard and purposefully set. As he put his horse to the rise, Britt heard him swear loudly and to himself declare:

"I'll watch that pocket if I got to lay here all year!"

Britt came to his feet then. He was glad he'd heard what he had. Glad Buck Dean wasn't the ranny who'd come for those cattle that Kiggy had shoved in there. Buck saw him. His hand flashed for his gun. Britt yelled, and Buck stayed his draw. He rode on up and looked questioningly at Britt.

"Tie your horse back a ways, Buck," Britt said. "I got the same idea you got—only before you got it. How'd you——"

"I trailed some cows," Buck broke in flatly.

"An' I trailed a snake," said Britt.

"It's goin' to make it hard, Britt," Buck warned. "You let me handle him, for I'm damned sure I know what snake you mean."

"I'll handle it myself," Britt growled. "It's my play, an' I aim to learn things first. You understand; he's *my* snake."

Buck sighed, nodded, and said: "The same, it's silly."

"Easy for him, ridin' over Rafter-A, to run off little bitsy bunches an' hide them for somebody else to pick up, brand, or hide somewhere's else," Britt grumbled. "But where is the stuff goin'? An' is that Scarva—— *Sssshh!*"

For out of the Little Lost roughness had come two riders; a break in the swirling snow. Buck gripped Britt's left arm.

He muttered: "The short devil is Huler. He's supposed to be in a line camp for us. An' the tall coyote is Pentro, who bought Pap an' Louellen's place in Little Lost—— Britt, hold your fire!"

V.

BRITT needed no such admonition. He'd hold his fire for a bit. When the time came, he'd march down that rise, and it was up to those two below. He hoped they'd

make a fight of it. He surely hoped so!

They watched the two men dismount. Huler reached under his sheepskin coat and pulled out a running iron. He began gathering a bundle of sticks for a fire. Pentro, though, seemed to be dissenting.

"Pentro wants to move them on before they work the brands an' slap new hot ones on those calves," Buck mumbled. "Hell, Britt, we've been blind. Through the Little Lost country, into some of those passes in the Bitter Roots an' into Montana. I bet Pentro's got a market up there for shady stuff. But the way it's been worked, we couldn't catch up with them."

"They've reached the end of their string now," Britt returned harshly.

"Huler's been pushing our Leaning D stuff where Kiggy could get it. Hurt Rafter-A more, because we got fifteen to your one. And half your calves wasn't branded. The damn——"

Below them, Huler evidently had won his point. He built a fire. Pentro took down his rope and looped a calf and dragged it close to the blaze. Tensed, rifles at ready, Britt and Buck waited. The calf bawled. The cow bawled back from the brush corral. A brand, Pentro's it later was seen, was run on the calf.

"A cow with one brand, her calf with another. Plenty of evidence," Britt remarked. "Come on."

Together they went afoot down the little hill. Pentro was roping out another calf. Huler was bent above the fire. It was Huler who looked up and saw the grim and determined men who bore down upon them. Huler did not hesitate. He grabbed for his gun. Britt and Buck fired together.

Huler was picked off his feet, spun half about, and flung down on his back. One spur dragged a deep furrow in the snow and the dirt as his right leg drew up and kicked back convulsively. That, then, ceased. Huler had crossed up his last outfit and had rustled his last beef. But at that, compared to Kiggy and his type, Huler had picked the best way.

Pentro had dropped his rope. He drew his gun as he crashed his horse crazily through the opposite side of the brush corral. Buck fired. Missed. Britt fired, deliberately and unhurriedly while Pentro turned in the saddle and blindly emptied his gun. Bullets kicked up snow around Britt. The devil with them! He pressed trigger.

Pentro screamed as he was knocked half over the saddle horn. His horse veered, and Pentro sprawled, squalling and kicking, to the ground. Britt was upon him as he jumped to his feet, left hand clutching his right shoulder, and tried to run. The man, tall, gaunt, hatchet-faced, belied his hard appearance and dropped to his knees.

"My shoulder!" he screamed. "You've broken it! You've killed me!"

"It ain't your shoulder you got to worry about. Nope! It's your neck," Britt jeered, yanking Pentro to his feet.

He winked at Buck. Buck imperceptibly nodded, yet somehow gained the impression that Britt Allaman could cheerfully have hanged Pentro. Roughly, then, while Pentro groaned and shook, Britt shoved him into the saddle and tied his feet together under the horse's belly.

Aside, Britt told Buck: "Take him in to Goff. I'm thinkin', before many hours, Pentro'll give up an' spill hisself all over the place. Me, I'm goin' to the ranch."

"You're a fool," Buck said. "Best to let me handle him. There's Lou-

ellen, his cousin. She's loyal and soft-hearted, an' if you get Kiggy, it'll be a barrier between you."

"There's one there now. My mind's made up," Britt answered tersely. "We ain't got no actual proof yet that Kiggy was stealin', like we have on Pentro. But I'll beat admission of his end out of him, or shoot it out! You get Goff to send somebody out here to have a look at Huler."

He walked rapidly up the rise to get his horse. And thus Britt Allaman was cutting back into the past. The trouble would soon be ended—rustling trouble. Louellen could go on, then, and make something of Rafter-A. As for himself, he was going to let her have the place. She wouldn't get a chance to run him off—after he got Kiggy.

Buck, with the groaning, whining Pentro, rode toward Shellerton. Britt rode toward home. Home? The thought turned him bitter. Behind them, blotted by the swirling snow, a cow bawled answer to her calf in the brush corral. Snow filled the creases of Huler's clothes and clotted wetly upon his still, stark face. End of a rustler's trail.

LOUELLEN had one look at Britt. She caught her breath sharply, her face going pale. "Britt, what's the matter?" she quavered.

"Where's Kiggy?" Britt grunted.

"He isn't here. Britt, you aren't —— No! I can see it in your eyes, murder! You want to kill him. Britt, think what that would mean."

"It means one less rattler in the world," Britt rapped out.

"It means you and I——"

"Where—is—Kiggy!"

Desperately the girl tried to prevent this thing; and made the mistake that clinched Britt's decision. "If you harm him, it means you do not live up to Silent Allaman's will. I shall have to——"

"You can have the place. I don't want it. Not as bad as you, that you'd marry me to make sure of gettin' it," he flung at her, his senses, judgment, swept away in a blind, red burst of anger. "Kiggy's been helpin' steal Rafter-A blind; stealin' from the Deans, too. I caught him. Buck an' me just settled two of them. Kiggy's next."

Nerves and senses numbed, the girl dropped into a chair by the kitchen table. "Kiggy hasn't c-come back. And I huh-hate you!" she sobbed wildly.

Britt swore and went out, slamming the door hard after him. He found Pap in the blacksmith shop, puttering around the forge.

"Where's Kiggy?" Britt demanded.

Pap took one look at Britt's bleak face and frost-dusted eyes. He laid down the piece of iron he'd been heating, shook his head. "He ain't been back since he rode out this mornin', Britt. An' I bet, wherever he is, it's best he keeps goin'. You fin'ly caught up with him? I been suspectin' that coyote for quite a spell. Once was when a roll of bills fell outa his pocket. Where'd *he* get money?"

"He'll explain that hisself, when he comes back," Britt snapped. "I'll choke it out of him, an' you're gonna witness it."

"Too bad for Lou', Britt."

Britt glared at Pap. Pap turned back to the forge. Britt sat on a box and smoked furiously.

IN SHELLERTON, Kiggy Jedrow sat with Scarva in the back room of the Card House.

He said: "I got your note tellin' me to come in. I left the stock

where Pentro an' Huler could pick it up easy. At the brush corral."

Scarva made an impatient gesture. "I'm tired of this petty pilfering. That place I own in Montana can winter ten times what you and Huler and Pentro can work through his place, the way you're going at it. What do you think I set Pentro up out there for?"

"But——"

"But, hell! If this Allaman is in the way, get a rifle and let him have it from the brush. You go back and tell Pentro—— Who's there?"

"Timmons, Scarva, let me in, quick."

There was urgency in the voice of the man who'd knocked on the door. Scarva got up and let him in. The man, a loafer and stable bum of the town, was wide-eyed, shaking.

"Buck Dean jest rid in, Scarva. He had Pentro a pris'ner. Pentro'd bin shot an' was blubberin' to beat hell. Goff's got him down at the jail."

Scarva stiffened. Color left his face. He looked at Kiggy, bit his lips.

"Go get a drink, and then go back to the jail!" he suddenly snapped at Timmons. "When everybody leaves, let me know. The jailer's sick. Goff'll be there this afternoon and this evening. Find out what cell Pentro is in—everything. Beat it!"

"Scarva," Kiggy's voice was hoarse and shaking, "what're you goin' to do? We'd better tail. Pentro will talk an'——"

"What am *I* going to do?" Scarva raged. "You mean what are *we* going to do. You're in this. And there's a way out."

"I tell you——"

Scarva drew his gun and spun the cylinder. "Well?"

"Yes. Sure, Scarva," Kiggy groaned.

"We're going to stop Pentro's mouth; that's what. While I sneak up outside the jail, you're going to talk to Goff in the office. And while you're holding his attention, I'm fixing Pentro plenty through the cell window."

Kiggy groaned. Grabbed a bottle and drank deep. Scarva chuckled.

In half an hour, Timmons was back. "Goff's alone. Buck Dean is in the Cowhand Café. Others have drifted off. An' from what I hear, Pentro's goin' to talk about as soon as Goff offers him a deal."

"What cell is Pentro in?"

"He's in the inside cell on the corridor. An', Scarva, I figgered things, an' thought that wouldn't be so good —a cell with no winders. So, while the folks was gawkin' around, I snuk back an' slipped the latch on that back door into the jail. You know, I figger New Mexico'd be more my style."

"I could shoot you," Scarva reflected. "But it will be better to pay you. You've earned it. Here."

Timmons took the wad of bills flung at him and got out as fast as he could. Scarva might change his mind.

Scarva got up. "Come on. Take a drink, Kiggy. And if you fall down on this——" He patted the gun under his coat.

Kiggy whimpered to himself, took a drink, and went out ahead of Scarva. Snow was still falling. Great flakes that wabbled, caught the wind, and swooped to the street. Kiggy shivered, but not from the cold. The world was too ghostly to suit his nerves.

He steeled himself and walked into the jail office. Goff, seated at his old desk, looked inquiringly up at him.

"Britt Allaman told me to come

on in an' see if Pentro had confessed," Kiggy explained.

The door to the cell block rattled. A draft had been created, as though the back door might be open. From being slightly suspicious, Goff was instantly warned. He jumped to his feet, smashed a heavy fist into Kiggy's white face, and yanked open the door into the cell corridor.

A man screamed and tried to shout a prayer—Pentro's voice. Gun thrust between the bars, Scarva mercilessly sent two shots out that turned the screams to a liquid burble. He wheeled, then, cried a curse, and raised his gun toward Goff. The sheriff's gun thundered and echoed in the corridor. Scarva grasped at bars, missed, fell.

Crazy with coward's fear, the beat of guns, the screams, the hellish aspect of it all bringing out the rat breed in him, Kiggy held his broken nose and drew his gun. It crashed, just once. Goff went strickenly onto his face, the bullet in his back.

VI.

RIDE! The word screamed itself in Kiggy's mind. Things had gone wrong. Scarva was dead, and so was Goff. Goff wouldn't be able to tell. And maybe the men who'd come shouting toward the jail had not recognized him through the falling curtain of snow.

Kiggy Jedrow rode like a madman. He sobbed imploring prayers to his Maker—when Satan should have been a better bet. He felt the constricting noose of a rope around his throat and clawed at the buttoned collar of his shirt. His broken nose swelled his eyes almost closed, and tears of self-pity blinded him.

Ride! Ride! Ride!

Where? A measure of rodent cunning cooled into the fevered tumult of his mean brain. Where would be the best place? Pentro's cabin in Little Lost? No. There might be deputies, or cowboys, out there, rounding up rustled cattle. And Kiggy had to have grub and blankets and a rifle.

They wouldn't expect him to ride to Rafter-A. That would be the last place on earth they would expect him to ride. Britt Allaman? He wouldn't dare shoot Kiggy. And Britt had no way of knowing——

Kiggy cut to his left. Two miles, and the thin strand of wire that connected Leaning D with town was above him. He climbed one of the thin pine poles, yanked loose the wire, rode on.

"Now he can't know!" Kiggy cried aloud.

He'd get grub and other stuff from Louellen. He could fool her. Even tell her he was going somewhere to work because Britt was too much to work for. Maybe Britt might not be there.

So he rode, feeling the noose about his neck, looking ever back of him; yet feeling somehow smart by the move he aimed to make.

Far behind him, a grim, steel-hearted group of men, led by Buck Dean, pressed on. Their horses ran full out while they fanned and leaned far down, eyes seeking a few tracks not filled with the falling snow. A pack of determined hounds, a hundredfold justified in dragging down the coyote they now chased.

Buck Dean yelled, swerved. They came to the place where the telephone line was ripped down. From there on there were no tracks; not even the faint indentations that had guided them thus far.

"He had reason for that," Buck mused, his voice cold as the snow-filled, howling wind. "An' his reason could be only one: He's headin'

for Rafter-A, to get supplies or hide. Let's ride."

SOON it would be growing dusk, and then early darkness would fall. Britt had built a fire in the bunk house—a bunk house that he remembered in times when it had been filled with rollicking riders of Rafter-A. A bunk house that could again be like that. But he would not see it. Home-coming? Hell! Like being hog tied in Hades. Only he wasn't hog tied any more, and if Kiggy didn't show up near dark, Britt was going to Shellerton to dig him out.

The bunk house gave him the willies, anyhow. Reminded him of his past too much; his future the same. Britt looked up quickly as Pap came sliding in. The old man's seamed face bore an expression of anger, doubt, and regret. Yes, and determination.

"Britt, I know what it'll likely mean, but I got to tell you. Kiggy's up to the house. Snuk in a few minutes ago. Looks like the devil hisse'f was on his tail; an' somebody has busted his nose. He's feedin' Lou' a lot of stable salad about havin' a fist fight with you this mornin', an' goin' to work some'eres else. He don't know you're home, you see.

"Britt, he's lyin', an' he's goin' to get Lou' in trouble for helpin' him. That's why I come down to get you."

Britt was half out of the bunk house by the time this last sentence was finished. Long, jerky strides took him around to the kitchen door. He slammed it back and thrust himself inside, his hand brushing his gun as he stopped toward the center of the room.

Louellen cried out as she saw him. The bundle of food she held fell from her hands. Kiggy, stuffing his pockets with shells from a box on a shelf, wheeled.

"Ohhhhh!" he wailed.

He dropped the shells and started edging around to get Louellen between himself and Britt.

"You beat him this morning," Louellen sobbed. "Your temper, Britt, it will never be——"

"He lied," Britt gritted. "I wasn't that near him to-day. I watched them cows an' calves driven into the corral by that coyote. I waited for the others to come an' get them. Now he's in trouble, an' usin' you to help him out. Well—damn you, stop where you are!"

Britt's right fingers curled about the butt of his gun. In that move, Louellen saw all her dreams of happiness puffed away, even as a puff of smoke would come from that gun and drift into nothing, even as her future would drift. It wasn't for her worthless cousin that she acted as she did; but for those self-same dreams.

She flung herself on Britt. "Run!" she screamed at Kiggy. "Run!"

Kiggy started to draw his gun.

"No, you varmint!" Pap yelled from the living-room door. He looked at Kiggy over the long barrel of an old shotgun.

Britt was jerking Louellen this way and that. She clung to his gun arm. Kiggy kicked a chair out of his way and ran for the back door.

"Stop!"

Kiggy couldn't stop. He rammed his shrinking belly against the thrust-ahead barrel of Buck Dean's cocked gun. There were men behind Buck Dean. There were hard, grimacing faces pressed against the kitchen window, ghostlike in the failing gray light of day.

Britt looked at Buck. He ceased struggling with the girl. She sank

into a chair. Tears coursed down her face. Britt looked at her, and she could see only hate in his eyes. She thought it was.

Kiggy, whining, gasping, raised his hands. "I didn't mean to!" he squalled. "Oh, I didn't mean to! Listen——" He was panting, hoarse and sickening to hear. "Listen, I had——"

"Shut up!" Buck roared.

He spoke to Britt: "This—this *thing* shot Goff, in the back. Maybe the sheriff will live. Maybe not. He helped Scarva shoot Pentro to hush his mouth, an' shot Goff when the sheriff got Scarva. In the *back!*"

Britt snarled, "Let me——"

"Nuh-uh!" Buck shook his head. "Let the law take its proper course in a case like this—the *proper* course."

"Oh! Oh, sure!"

"An' you stay here. Come on, boys, take him out."

"What are you going to do?" Louellen cried.

"Why, take him to justice. Let the law handle it—properly."

"Lou', Lou'!" Kiggy screamed. "They're goin' to take me out an' hang——"

A heavy hand was clamped over his mouth and he was dragged, writhing and making inarticulate sounds, to his horse. He was still trying to fight, to run, to beg and pray, as they rode away toward Maverick Creek.

Britt looked at Pap. Pap shook his head and wiped moisture from his rheumy old eyes. Louellen just sat and sobbed.

Long, slow minutes passed. There came the sound of riders. Britt went out on the porch, Louellen rushing beside him. Buck Dean and the others rode up to the porch.

"This storm," Buck complained. "He got away from us. I doubt we'll ever catch him now. Anyhow, we'll not be bothered with him in this country again."

Louellen sobbed her relief. "I'm glad! It's better so," she cried, and turned and ran back in the house.

Britt was looking at Buck Dean's saddle horn. There had been a lass' rope coiled there when they took Kiggy away. There was none there now. Well, what else could they do? Buck looked sick. He was shaking.

He said, low: "I'll see you tonight, Britt. On Maverick Creek. Bring a shovel."

HIS FEW belongings in his old war bag, Britt Allaman mounted his gray. He had come home, thinking to leave trouble behind. And found that he, the tempest, had ridden a tempestuous trail. Well, the girl could have the place. He was through.

Snow lay white and glistening over the range. It was peaceful; and he wanted peace. No! Be damned if he'd admit, even to himself, that he did! He remembered he'd left his tobacco in the bunk house.

He swung off and went back to get it. And wished he had not. Louellen was there, and he'd avoided her this last day and a half. He didn't want to hear her crow when she learned he was leaving her in possession of the place. He wanted no preachments—not from her. And the sight of her—well, it hurt.

"Britt—Mr. Allaman," the girl said, "I want to talk to you."

"I don't want to hear it. I'm leavin'," Britt snapped.

She shook her head. "Not you. I—I'm leaving. I tried to be fair to your father's demands and was unfair to you. Oh, I don't blame you"—those work-worn little hands

were spread before her—"for hating me. But I won't be here for you to hate any more. The place is yours. I'm—getting—away."

Let her make him feel that she was giving up to him against her conscience? Try to make him feel his own place was a gift? Not much! Britt's blind, stubborn pride gripped him, roped him tight. He strode past her, slammed the door. Behind him he heard a loud wail.

He—against his stubborn will—looked in through a window. Louellen had thrown herself down upon the floor. Britt heard her cry: "He doesn't *want* me!" He looked closely. She was pressing a pair of bullet-torn, bloodstained gloves to her quivering lips.

"Get up off that floor before you catch your death of cold!" Britt gruffly commanded, rushing back inside.

He lifted her to her feet. The sobbing became muffled. Against his chest. Then ceased.

Pap, the shameless peeper, sneaked up and looked through the window. Backed—grinning like an ancient possum—away, and went to where Britt had left the rangy gray horse.

"You ain't goin' to be none needed now, horse," Pap said.

He led the gray into the barn.

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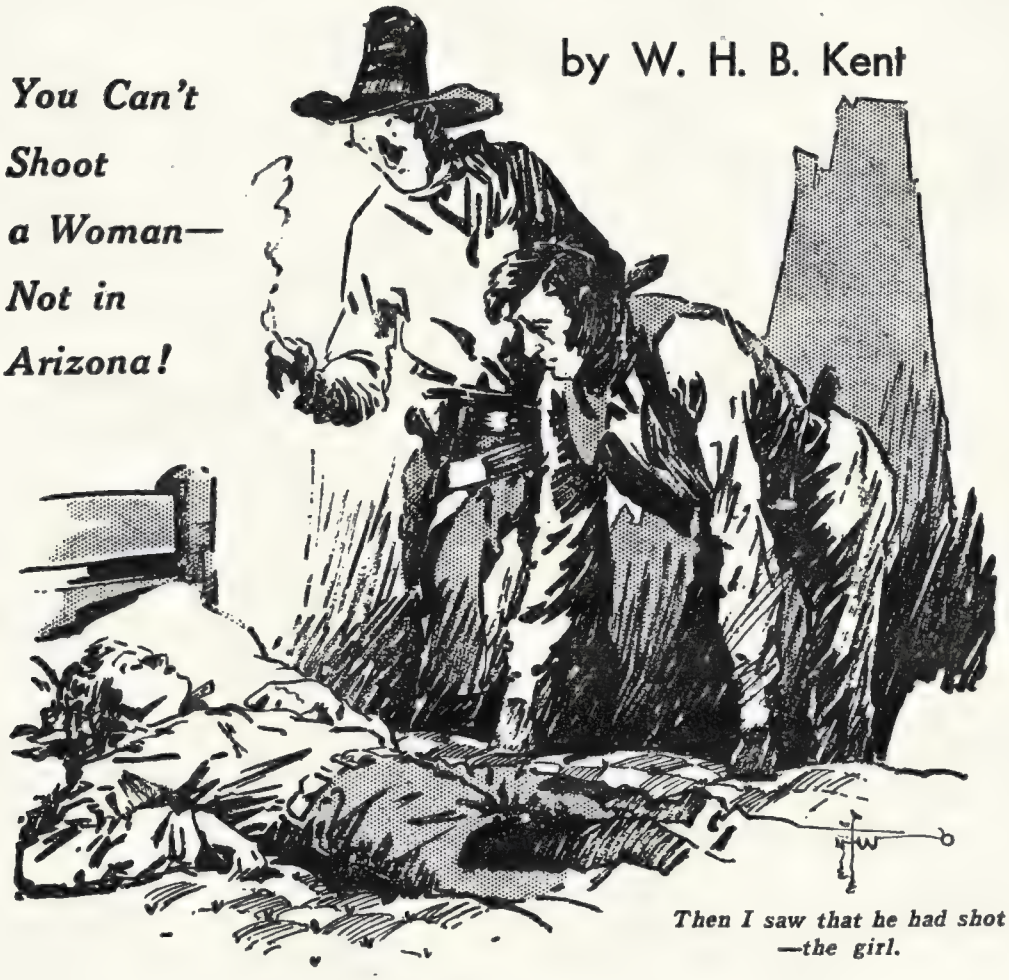
DOC SAVAGE IS A STREET & SMITH MAGAZINE--

POOR BLOOD

by W. H. B. Kent

You Can't Shoot a Woman—Not in Arizona!



Then I saw that he had shot —the girl.

YOU CAN'T shoot a woman, you know—not in Southern Arizona. Not even if you are "Baron" Carter and she is only Jane Harker—Jane Harker of the Bolton outfit. No; you can't shoot a woman, not down here, even if it was, really, an accident—an accident engineered by that damn Bolton.

Bolton figured he won, either way. If the girl got away with it, his cows would be in clover, so to speak. And if she didn't get away with it—well, then he would never have to account for the HAR stock.

What the girl thought, I don't know. I guess she thought only of those lean, thirsty cows—lean and hungry and thirsty, tossing their heads along the brutal barbs of the fence of Baron Carter.

Have you ever heard the moaning of starving cattle?

If you have, you will, perhaps, understand why the girl, Jane Harker, was cutting Baron Carter's fence that night.

OF COURSE, however, you can't shoot a woman, so when "Sockeye"

came to the ranch with a warrant for Carter, I was not surprised. Sockeye, our perpetual deputy, bald and red as a buzzard, showed me the warrant for Carter and said, "Take your time, Bill, take your time," as if he thought I was going to war over the warrant.

I grinned at Sockeye and told him to take his fool warrant up to the house and show it to Carter himself.

I liked Sockeye. No; I don't know that his being called "Sockeye" might have something to do with canned salmon. Sockeye was the perpetual deputy. Whoever was elected sheriff always kept Sockeye as a deputy. Sockeye did the work.

Curious fellow, Sockeye—you couldn't buy him, and you couldn't scare him. Think that over. How many men do you know whom you can neither buy nor scare?

So Sockeye rode up with the warrant, rubbing his bald head and looking at his hand as if he expected to find he had rubbed off some hair and saying: "Take your time, Bill; take your time. Here is a warrant for Carter. 'Attack with a deadly weapon.'"

I had to laugh. "Attack with a deadly weapon!" You can believe that Baron Carter's six-shooter was a "deadly weapon."

BUT I HAD better begin at the beginning. Carter's father was one of the first white men to bring cattle into Southern Arizona. He bought an old Spanish land grant, a long narrow strip of land that covered the bottom land along the Rio Sacatone.

That was in the old days—the old days when the Apaches were loose in the country. You can see the arrow and bullet marks in the old adobe at the ranch. They stood off old Cochise and his warriors there—stood them off for nine days. That was the school Carter grew up in; grew up tall and lean and strong, and with a notion that he owned the earth.

The Carters' main range was from the Rio Sacatone back south to the Cholla Mountains. They had it all their own way for years. Carter went East to college and all that. When Carter's grim old father died he left the best cow outfit in the territory, and Carter kept it up. And I have been the Carters' foreman for more years than I can remember.

It was a good cow country, and after a time the range filled up, and Carter began to feel crowded. So then he strung a drift fence from the north end of the Cholla Mountains clear to his land grant in the Sacatone valley. Most of the water in the country was along the base of the mountains—inside the fence.

A friend of Carter's from the East was visiting at the ranch one time, and I heard him tell Carter he was nothing but a robber baron out of the Middle Ages. The friend began calling him "Baron Carter," or just the "Baron." It stuck. We all got to calling him that. It seemed to fit.

Among the newcomers was a man named Bolton. Bolton was a mean, thieving sort, always on the verge of trouble. He had married a widow woman over in the Pecos country. Anyway, they drifted along west, stopping a while in the Mogollons and the San Simon, and then came down on the Sacatone and threw their stock in north of Carter's drift fence. Generally it was a good-enough place, but when the big dry-up came it was no place at all.

Bolton finally killed his wife—the former widow Harker. I don't

mean right out, it wasn't that—just that he was mean to her, mean all day, every day, year after year, until she died.

Before she died she got up spunk enough to turn over the old Harker brand, the HAR, to her daughter and had it recorded in her name. But, of course, the HAR stock never had any increase—that is, all the HAR calves were branded BT, Bolton's own iron, so, in time, the HAR brand practically disappeared.

The girl, Jane Harker, grew into a tall, slim girl with a great rope of dusky black hair and cool gray eyes. And there was a hard, defiant look in her face that made one want to beat up some one.

She wore her hair in a braid, inside her jumper. I never saw her wearing anything but ragged old blue jeans and a tattered hat that Bolton had thrown away; and always a belt and a six-shooter. Folks said she carried the gun on account of Bolton and kept it under her pillow nights.

She lived at the Bolton ranch, really one of the cowhands, and a good one. For all that she was a slim girl, she was strong as steel. But no one paid much attention to her; she was part of that damn Bolton outfit—a pariah.

Sometimes I had the notion she resented it. It was, when you stopped to think of it, a pretty dreadful life for a young woman.

THINGS went along well enough until the big drought—eighteen months and never a drop of rain. Bolton's range dried up, and his lean stock came down on Carter's fence and hung there, hungry and thirsty and lean, shaking dumb, restless heads from side to side and moaning their misery.

Carter put men to patrolling the fence, day and night. And I began getting ready for war.

It was soon after we began watching the fence that Carter and I were in town, standing on the board sidewalk, talking, when the girl came past. Carter's back was toward her and he stepped the wrong way and bumped into her. She was carrying a little bundle and it fell to the walk, a little red ribbon spilling out.

The girl flared out at Carter: "Get the hell out of the road!"

Carter had started to apologize, but when she said that he laughed and swept off his hat, bowing elaborately, mocking her—a mocking devil-light in his eyes. Carter was like that.

The girl started to say something, then turned, swept up her little bundle and walked away. From the way she held her shoulders I had the notion she wanted to cry. And for a few minutes I didn't like Carter—Baron Carter, tall and strong and successful, mocking that slim girl in old overalls and a tattered hat. And I remembered the poor little red ribbon—it seemed to me a desperate groping toward some of the things a young woman has a right to.

I suddenly had to swallow, and I tapped Carter on the chest and told him that for two cents I'd knock his damn head off.

Carter grinned and put his arm around my lean old carcass and said: "Go to it, Bill; I've got it coming."

Well, of course, then it was all right between Carter and me.

Riding back to the ranch Carter was moody and fighting his horse, something he never did. Once I heard him mutter: "Poor kid!"

That same night Carter took it into his head to patrol the fence

himself. He rode away just before dark.

IT WAS around midnight when Carter came back. We were asleep in the bunk house when he came and kicked the door open, calling for me. There was something desperate in his voice; something that made all the boys in the bunk house roll out of their blankets and begin pulling on their boots and buckling on their guns. But it wasn't guns we needed.

I could see that Carter was carrying something on his horse, in front of him, and he told me to get a doctor—get a doctor quick.

I told one of the boys to kill horses getting a doctor out from town, and I hurried ahead of Carter up to the house and got the door open.

"Light the lamp," he said, and he stumbled through the dark over to his bed in the corner.

I fumbled with the lamp, breaking matches in nervous fingers, but at last the flame flared up in the dusty glass chimney, and I turned to look at what was on the bed.

Well—it was the girl. Baron Carter had shot the girl, shot Jane Harker.

Carter broke out: "For Heaven's sake do something!"

For a minute I had hated him, but now I was sorry for him. There are worse things than being shot—and one of them is to have done the shooting.

But Carter had done all that could be done. She was shot through the leg, above the knee, and Carter had bound strips of his shirt, tightly, over the holes. The bleeding seemed to have stopped, but she had lost a lot of blood.

And I cursed Bolton—cursed him over and over. It was his work. I could see his smug grin and knew how he had planned the matter. If the girl was not discovered, the fence would be cut and the cattle let through. And if she was discovered, why, she was a girl—a woman—and Baron Carter would not shoot a woman.

And I could see Carter down by the fence, under the stars, riding softly along, watching and listening. And then the black shadow by the fence, the twang of cut wires, and the shadowy figure pulling the wires away to let the black shapes of moaning, restless cattle through.

And Carter with his six-shooter, there under the stars, saying never a word, but calmly shooting at the cutter of fences. That is the way Carter would do—no words at all, just calmly going to work to kill.

So now Carter and I sat there in the ranch house, helpless, watching the growing light of dawn drown out the lamp, watching the graying face of the girl with her underlip caught up under white teeth and resting there forgotten. Waiting years and years for the doctor, I prayed to a long-forgotten God. I thought she was slipping away from us, slipping away with the drifting shadows of the departing night.

Once, for an instant, she had roused herself, talking huskily to Carter. "Damn you!" she said. "I cut it in three places."

A minute later she said: "They are all through by now."

Carter bent over her, speaking softly, gently, saying: "I hope so."

I didn't understand that; not then. I thought it was remorse. I didn't know, then, what had happened to Carter during those long miles when he carried the wounded girl in his arms.

HORSES came to the house, and I jumped out to meet the doctor. He was sore and cramped and nearly as dead as the horse he rode. The cow-puncher was handing him his little black bag and grinning, apologetically, as the doctor cursed him for making him ride like that. I had a sickening feeling that the doctor might not be much use to us.

Once in the room, however, where the girl was, the doctor seemed to shed his anger with his coat. It suddenly seemed as if something strong and dependable had come into the room, and now everything would be all right. I suppose good doctors are like that.

After a long time the doctor said that there was nothing to worry about, and an intolerable burden slid off our hearts. He said she had lost a lot of blood, but she would be all right. She would need a lot of care and feeding up.

"Of course," he said to Carter, "she can't be moved. She will have to stay here. I'll send a woman out from town."

Carter laughed aloud, happily, "Of course she'll stay," he said.

I caught the girl's whisper: "Like hell I will!"

Carter turned and looked down at her, and there were things in his eyes that I had never seen before. The girl's wide gray eyes met his, and after a long time the hard, defiant look went out of them, and a faint flush crept up the wan cheeks. She sighed a little ghost of a sigh, closed her eyes, and went to sleep.

The doctor demanded a wagon for the trip back to town. The boys grinned, and the doctor got mad again and told them he hoped he'd get his hands on them sometime. He'd teach 'em to ride a man to death!

Ready to go, the doctor asked Carter if he should notify Bolton, and Carter grinned, with the devil-light in his eyes.

"By all means," he said. "By all means notify Bolton, and if Bolton wants her, tell him to come and get her—with a gun."

CARTER gave orders to wait until all the Bolton cattle were through and then string new wire. The boys were expecting orders to start right away rounding up the Bolton stock and throwing them outside the fence. They thought it was remorse and that Carter was getting soft.

As one of the boys said, "You can't run a cow outfit on remorse," ending up with, "and I hope them Bolton cows choke theirselves!"

The woman came out from town and took over the house. Carter moved down to the bunk house, but he spent most of his time with the girl. And the girl grew stronger, and the color came back to her face, and in no time at all she was out on the porch.

Then she was taking a few uncertain steps, with Carter bowing over her, anxious, and the girl looking at him, laughing. And that hard, defiant look had gone out of her face, and I wanted to cry when I saw her cool gray eyes had turned deep and warm. Anybody could see how it was with Baron Carter and the girl.

Then one day Carter went down to the blacksmith shop and told old Juan to make a new iron, an HAR. Well, that was the girl's own brand, and I gave a yell of delight.

And Carter grinned and put his arm around me, the way he has always done since, as a little boy, he learned that was the way to get something out of old Bill.

"It'll mean war," I told him, feel-

ing obliged to give good advice and hoping he wouldn't take it.

Carter only grinned, saying: "Start the boys to-morrow, Bill. Round up all the Bolton stock and brand 'em HAR."

As one of the boys put it: "Oh, I'll die laughing—Bolton sends the girl down to cut fences, and now Bolton loses both the girl and his stock."

I guess no cow outfit ever went at their work with the swift good will our boys went at the rebranding.

THE FINISH came one day when Carter and I were the only men at the ranch. The boys were all out doing the last of the branding, and old Juan had gone to town. Bolton must have had a spy out and knew how things were. He certainly caught us.

Carter and I were working on the lower windmill—the one down in the arroyo back of the house. It was along toward noon when we finished and came back up to the house. Carter had no gun but, as always, I was wearing mine. I'd worn it so many years that I never felt dressed without it. But I had a big wrench in my hand when we walked around the corner of the house and looked into the guns of Bolton and his crew—Bolton and three of his men, a mean-looking outfit.

Well, when four men throw their six-shooters down on you, and you packing a monkey wrench, you do what you are told. So we reached for the sky and backed up against the house.

"Think you can shoot a girl and then steal our stock, do you?" Bolton jeered. He cursed on, rubbing it in, as a whelp like him would. "Baron Carter of the Sacatone—yah—you won't look so pretty when I get finished with you, you girl shooter."

Then a window beside us slammed up, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the girl, and a wild hope flared. I just knew that in a minute she would pull a gun and all the hate of the years of her bitter girlhood would flare out at Bolton. I got ready to laugh and jeer a little myself.

And then I couldn't believe my ears. It was all wrong. Things hadn't ought to happen that way, and my wild hope sickened and died as I heard the girl talking to Bolton.

"I was wondering how long you'd let me be cooped up in this place," she said. "Wait a minute; I'm coming out."

And a minute later she came out of the door and down off the end of the porch. She never even looked at us.

She walked out between us, and for a wild instant I hoped she would blanket their guns, and I could get mine and go to work. But two of them were still covering us, and it was too risky. Not but that I would have died, quite willingly, just then, but I couldn't hope to get all four before I went. Wild, flaring rage rocked me, and I would have killed all five of them if I could.

The girl was standing by Bolton, asking: "Where do I ride?"

And Bolton said jeeringly: "Get old Bill's gun. He might hurt hisself." And the girl came and unbuckled my belt and buckled it around her own waist, not looking at me at all.

I remembered afterward that she seemed to be softly whispering. But my rage stopped my ears, and I heard nothing.

Then Bolton pulled his foot out

of the stirrup, the girl put her foot in the place and swung up behind Bolton, and they whirled and went down the lane in a cloud of dust and spurting pebbles.

And to this day I believe that Bolton took the girl up behind him because he was afraid we might get a gun and shoot him in the back.

I watched the horses running in a cloud of dust, and then they were gone around the point of the hill. And I felt a bitterness beyond that which any man should be asked to stand. It seemed to me that all that was good, all that was fine and worth while, had gone out of life. Heaven knows I knew there were such women—but you don't believe they are the ones you know.

After a long time I turned to look at Carter and forgot the girl. Carter still stood there, backed up against the house, his forgotten hands stretched above his head. I had the dreadful thought that the man had been crucified.

His eyes, in his cold, dead face, came slowly to meet mine and hung there, seeing nothing. Then slowly, painfully, he began to grin, and I hope I'll never again see a grin like that—just the lips twisted back over the teeth.

Carter brought his hands down and looked at them, a little surprised. Then he shrugged, whispering: "Well, I suppose they are like that. Poor blood! That's it," he added thoughtfully, as if bringing to light something he had always known. "Poor blood!"

Then he made a pitiful attempt at straightening his shoulders, saying: "It's all right, Bill. It's all right. I'll get over it."

Well, there it is—that is why, for father and son, I've run the Carter outfit for forty years.

THREE DAYS later Sockeye rode in with a warrant for Carter. That came of shooting a woman. If it had been a man fight there would have been no bother.

Sockeye, deputy sheriff, on his big roan, taking off his hat, rubbing his red bald head and then looking at his hand, saying "Take your time, Bill; take your time," and handing me the warrant for Carter.

We joked a bit about the "deadly weapon," Sockeye grinning and saying, apologetically: "Well, you know how 'tis, Bill. That's the way these fool lawyers talk."

Then Sockeye got serious. "Now me and you, Bill, we got sense, but Carter, he's young and hot-headed, and if I flash that warrant on him mebbeso he gets hostile."

Sockeye hooked one leg comfortably around the horn of his saddle and began rolling a cigarette. "And besides," he went on, "if I take Carter in now, I have to lock him up, don't I? Well, that ain't no good.

"So you take the warrant and have a little talk with Carter, and then to-morrow morning, long about nine o'clock, you and Carter sort of happen into court, and everything is nice and peaceable. Now take your time, Bill; take your time, and see if that ain't the best way."

If anybody gets the idea that Sockeye was afraid of Carter, they don't know Sockeye. Good old Sockeye was trying to be nice to us, and I was grateful.

"That's all right, Sockeye," I told him, "and much obliged. Leave it to me. I'll produce Carter."

Then, to my disgust, Carter walked out of the corral, spoke to Sockeye:

"I heard you talking about a warrant, Sockeye. Give it to me."

He didn't seem interested, just being polite to Sockeye. That was what was bothering me—he just didn't seem to care about anything.

So I handed the warrant to Carter, and he didn't even look at it.

"What time you want me, Sockeye?" he asked indifferently.

Sockeye replied: "Nine o'clock."

Carter said listlessly "All right," and walked away.

Then I asked: "But look here, Sockeye, I ain't giving you no news when I ask what about branding the Bolton stock? Ain't Bolton going to law over that, too?"

Sockeye laughed and put his foot in the stirrup, gathering up the reins, "Oh, no!" he said. "Bolton wanted some more warrants for cattle stealing, meaning Carter and you and your whole outfit, but old Jedge Bench wouldn't stand for that. Everybody knows most of the stock belongs to the girl, anyway, and you burned her brand on 'em. Well, see you to-morrow. Adios!"

THAT NIGHT, in the bunk house, I lay awake a long time thinking things over. I knew that old Judge Bench would be as easy on Carter as he could. The old judge and Carter's father had been like two fingers on the same hand. Nothing but a small fine I guessed.

And then I began to think perhaps it would be a good thing to have Carter locked up for a while—say a month. That would give me time to clear out the Bolton outfit.

Seemed to me I ought to do that for Carter. And if Carter was in jail, why, he would not be mixed up in it—it would just be old Bill—old Bill not knowing times were changed, and the law had come to the Sacatone.

What they did to me afterward wouldn't matter—if they caught me, which wasn't likely. The more I thought of just calmly and quietly wiping out the Bolton outfit, the better I liked it.

THE NEXT morning we started for town. I took five of the boys along. I told them there might be trouble, and they were pleased and hopeful, but I told them not to make a move until I gave the word.

I knew I could depend on them. I'd been picking our outfit for years, picking and repicking, and there wasn't an outfit in the South that could stack up with our boys.

Seemed to me the very next thing I took notice of was that we were tying the ponies along the hitch rail in front of the courthouse in town. Then I remembered something and pulled Carter back.

"Look here," I told him, "we ain't got no lawyer."

Carter shrugged, indifferent. "What's the use? I'll be my own lawyer."

Then I saw that lawyer fellow Brown going in, and I called to him and told him he was our lawyer. He seemed pleased and got important and started to talk about a conference, and I told him to cinch himself up and just ride herd on the law points—on the facts we'd look after ourselves. He wanted to talk some more, and I heard one of the boys nudge him and say:

"Don't rile old Bill just now. 'Tain't safe."

I pushed Carter into the middle of the boys and walked into the courtroom that way, looking for the Bolton outfit.

Bolton and his gang were there, sitting in a bunch on the benches, and I was glad to see it. If it really came to a war there in the courtroom I wanted them bunched.

Old Judge Bench was up there behind his desk, looking down at us over his specs and looking mighty severe. Sockeye was there, too, leaning against the desk, watching us.

I noticed that in addition to the belt gun he always wore, he had another gun hung over the top band of his pants. I grinned at him, but Sockeye didn't flick an eyelash. Sockeye was on the job now, and I felt sorry for the man who first pulled a gun in that courtroom.

I gave our boys a look, and they scattered, casuallike, far apart, and where they could cover the Bolton outfit. If Bolton started something, he wouldn't live long enough to be sorry. Then I went on down into the room with Carter and the lawyer man. It seemed we were to sit at a table inside the railing, and I sat where I could watch Bolton.

Carter didn't sit down, but stood there, facing the Bolton outfit, and I followed his look and saw the girl, Jane Harker, sitting half hidden beside Bolton. I wondered what she had done with my gun.

She was wearing the same ragged old overalls, and I wondered if she had mended the bullet holes in the leg. The tattered old hat was in her lap, and something different about her made me look closer, and then I saw that her dusky black hair was piled high on her head. Somehow, it made her seem older, more important.

Carter just stood there looking at her, and the crowded courtroom was still. The girl looked away, out of the window, and I could see the blood flooding up her cheeks.

I went into a rage and yanked Carter down into a chair, snarling at him: "Sit down, you damn fool!"

I was busy keeping an eye on the Bolton outfit and didn't pay much attention to all the talk that went on. I took a look at the jury—knew 'em all, just as good as any other bunch. More talk, and then I heard Sockeye say:

"Jane Harker. Jane Harker take the stand."

Then I began to be interested.

THE GIRL stood up and moved across in front of the jury, was sworn, and climbed up into the chair at one end of old Bench's desk.

The prosecuting attorney was a funny little squirt. He was all right, just a young lad fresh out from the East, serious as a sick owl —all lawyer. He was prosecuting attorney because nobody else would take the job. I have a notion he thought this case was his chance in life.

He came up and put one foot on the platform plumb friendly and confidential, asking a lot of questions that it seemed to me led to nowhere. I wished he'd get on with it, let that girl do her dirty work and get it over with.

I heard the lawyer lad ask: "And when you were down there in the dark, trying to let your poor starving cattle through Carter's illegal fence some one shot you?"

The girl said: "Yes. Some one shot me."

Then the lawyer lad snapped out: "Miss Harker, who shot you?"

And then I couldn't believe my own ears. It wasn't right; it couldn't happen; and it seemed to me that I had years in which to think and listen before I fully realized that the girl had said, clearly and distinctly:

"I don't know!"

The crowded courtroom was dead still now, people leaning forward,

holding their breaths, waiting. I looked at the lawyer lad, standing up now, facing the girl, his face growing red and hot as he half shouted:

"You don't know?"

The girl looked at him out of those cool gray eyes, saying: "No, sir. You see, Mr. Carter found me, later, after I had been shot, and he took me to the ranch and sent for the doctor. So you see it couldn't have been Mr. Carter."

You could have heard a fly beat its wings in that courtroom, and then the girl spoke again:

"Oh, no!" she said. "It was not Mr. Carter."

A man in the jury threw back his head and broke out into a great laugh, and then the crowd in the courtroom began laughing and yelling, and old Judge Bench was banging with his little mallet and broke it, and the crowd laughed some more, and I was afraid the old judge would have a stroke.

Then the lawyer lad was talking again, and they hushed to listen. The lad was saying:

"Your honor, I apologize. I have been misinformed or I would not have prosecuted this case. I move that the defendant be dismissed."

The old judge beamed down at him saying "Live and learn, lad. Case dismissed," and he tried to bang the desk with his mallet, but he had only the handle, and we all laughed again.

The Bolton outfit were on their feet now, a sullen, ugly group, and I watched them, ready, but they simply went on out.

Then I turned to see Carter and the girl standing there together, below Judge Bench's desk, and I heard the girl saying:

"But what could I do? They would have killed you there at the ranch if I had not gone with them."

Then I let out a yell that seemed to scare the lawyer lad.

So I was best man at a wedding, right there and then, with our boys grouped around and Sockeye rubbing his bald head and looking at his hand. I expected to hear Sockeye tell the judge "Take your time, judge; take your time."

Out in front of the courthouse the girl was looking up at a transformed Carter, a deep, warm light in her gray eyes, blushing a little, saying: "Lend me some money until I can sell an HAR cow. I want to buy a dress."

Carter laughed. "Money! You can have all the money in the bank. Let's go there now."

And he put his arm across her shoulders, and they walked that way along down the rickety board walk. And people came to the doors and laughed and waved to them, happy in their happiness, but Carter and Jane saw only each other.

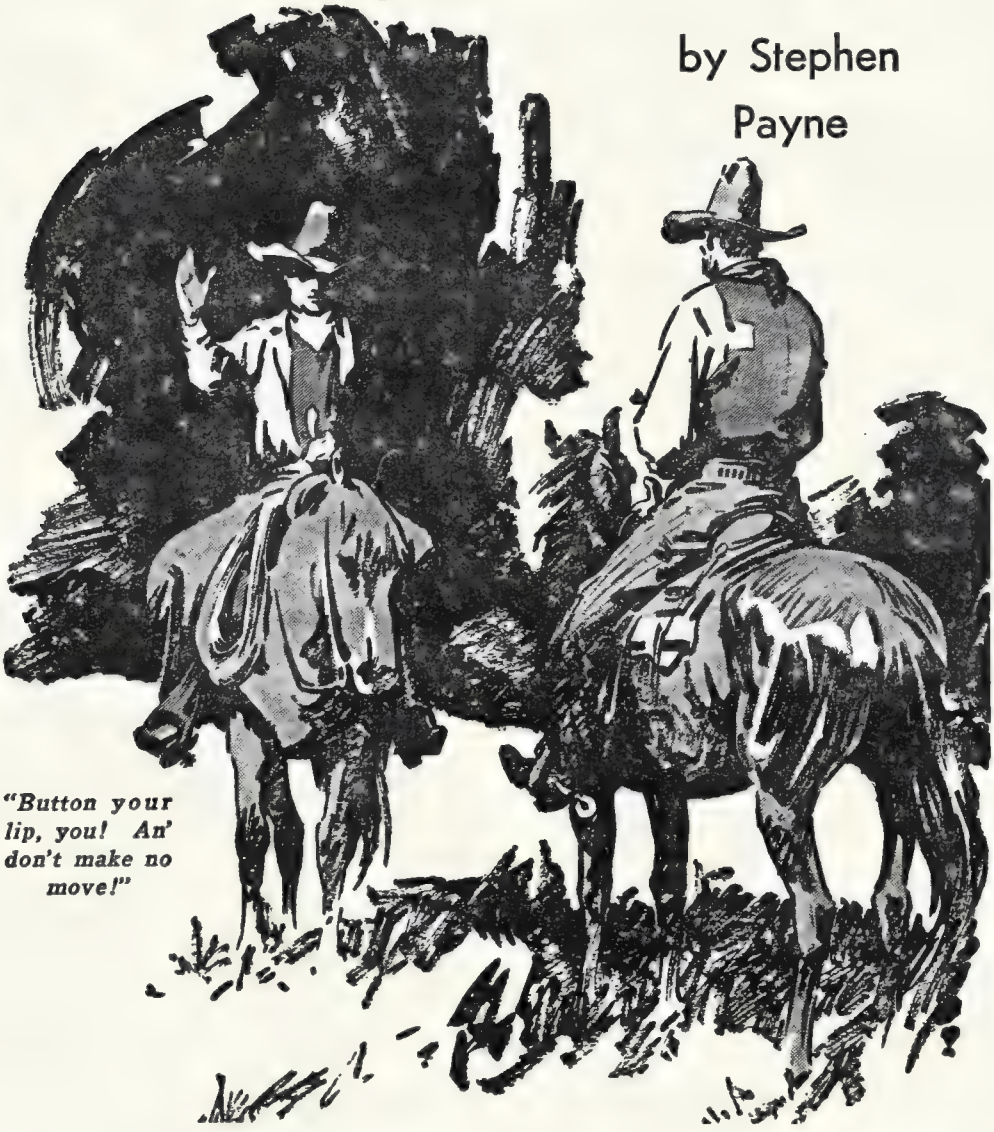
IT ALL seemed so nice and peaceable, but I did not forget my business, and I gave a nod to the boys. It gave me a thrill to see those picked lads shift their guns around front, scattering out ahead and behind us, watching for Bolton.

But I didn't need to worry. We never saw Bolton again. He had lost both the girl and the cattle, and he seemed just to fold up and quit. He gathered what little he had left and drifted on west—over into the Santa Cruz country.

Don't know where he'd go after that, for beyond the Santa Cruz is the desert, with nothing but rattlesnakes, horny toads and Gila monsters. Well, he'd be among his blood brothers!

Camp Aflame

by Stephen Payne



"Button your lip, you! An' don't make no move!"

WHEN Frank John Roberts rode into the JR Ranch he was leading a horse with an empty packsaddle on its back. Frank John himself, young, debonair, with twinkling brown eyes set wide apart in his genial brown face, was whistling "The Girl I Left Behind Me," happy as a young colt at twilight.

But as his roan horse swung past the low, rambling log house, a door was jerked open, and Frank John saw the solid figure of his father with yellow lamplight behind it.

"Son, where you been? Come here."

Frank John stopped whistling to say: "Wait till I put up my hoss, dad." Privately he added: "Some-

thin' shore bitin' on the old man."

He called his father "the old man," as did everybody in this mountainous section of Wyoming, and he liked the crusty old bear immensely—even though there were times when the young cowboy felt like telling the grizzled rancher where to head in.

However, Frank John had inherited from his mother a sunny disposition, a cheery outlook on life, and a tolerant attitude toward his fellow man.

"Frank John," they called this young cowboy, never just Frank or John. There was a reason that went back to the day of his birth.

"We'll call the little shaver John," said old John Roberts to the boy's radiant-eyed mother.

"No," she had dared to protest. "He's as much my boy as yours. We'll call him Frank for my brother, who was father and mother as well as brother to me in the days before you ever met me, John Roberts."

Roberts had yielded a point for once, after argument, but only to a certain extent. "Frank John 'tis, then," he said.

This was twenty-four years ago. There had never been another child, and the splendid woman, who'd helped iron-fisted John Roberts build up the JR from a homesteader's claim and a half dozen cows to the big, prosperous cow outfit of Titan Hills, had long since gone to her reward.

Now old John and young Frank John lived alone in the rambling log house, with only a Chinese cook, and old John was wont to say pridefully:

"You buckle down and tend to business, kid, and you'll get 'er all when I go over the divide."

And Frank John was making a cowman all right, although too easy-going, too lacking of a sense of responsibility to please his father. Because of this, John Roberts had not taken his son into partnership when Frank John reached twenty-one.

"I'll pay you top wages, kid, since you're of age. Don't want you ramblin' 'round the country. But you take your orders from me and from Heck Thomas. Heck's still the best range foreman north of Arizony. When you've larnt as much cow savvy as he knows, I'll make you cow foreman or take you into the business."

And old John had been watching the kid, as he still called Frank John, hoping he'd show a flare of ambition, a sense of responsibility, and a feeling of authority that would no longer tolerate his taking orders from a hired foreman. But to the old-timer's disgust, Frank John seemed perfectly content with his lot.

A CRISIS was at hand this summer evening when the stars had just come out to wink down on butte and hogback, on grassy valley and sagebrush hill, sweeping plains and canyon-scarred mountains of this vast range land; a crisis of which young Frank John was not yet fully aware.

But old John Roberts was. That was why his voice was so challengingly gruff and harsh as he now snorted a reply to his kid out in the yard on a roan horse, leading another animal with an empty packsaddle on its back. His kid, wearing a white shirt, a blue necktie, and a brand-new pear-gray hat. Those weren't the kind of clothes for range work, and that pack horse—well, old John Roberts knew all about it.

He roared: "Leave your hosses stand and come here, son."

Frank John stepped obediently to

the door, and as the light shone upon him his father saw a lithe young man one inch under six feet, good shoulders, lean hips, strong brown hands, seldom covered by gloves, and a clean-cut, square face with a wide mouth made for smiling.

"Come in," said old John, and he shut the door. "Set down, kid. I got somethin' to say to you.

"When we rid in to-night," John Roberts plunged on, "thar wasn't no meat for supper, and you wasn't home. I asked Hot Suds what become of the hind quarter of beef which I knowed was on hand this mornin', and the damn chink said 'Him allee glone.' Whar you been, son? What'd you do with that quarter of beef?"

Color flooded Frank John's neck, cheeks, even his forehead. He found it hard to look at his belligerent parent. "That family on 'Leven Mile is plumb down and out, dad. No chuck, no nothin'. I——"

"You took 'em our beef, huh? Damned squatters, aimin' to stretch barbed wire round a hunk of my—our—best range. Sooner they starve the sooner they'll drift on. You, my kid, took 'em my beef, knowin' how I hate——"

"There ain't no sense or reason for your hate, dad. The Harkness family is just as good as we are. Maybe they're better. They've got a right to——"

"Frank John, you tellin' me that squatters has got a right on our cow range? What's come over you? I've tried to raise you up a cowman. Now you side in with a bunch of damned——"

"Don't say it, dad." The young cowboy's voice was dangerously quiet, the brown eyes kindling. "Why do you hate——"

"Squatters? They run me outa business oncet. Ruint me. That was afore you was born—in Montana. Settlers hogged our range, stretched their wire. Every nickel I had was in Texas dogies which was mortgaged besides. I had to turn them dogies at a big loss. Not a cent left for me.

"Drifted down here, started all over with nothin'. Now squatters is beginnin' to horn in here, and you feed 'em. Feed 'em when I hate 'em, like I hate sheep. Son, you know what it means when settlers begin fencin' your cow range. Why'd you——"

"There ain't but one family, dad, and they're white. They're square-shooters. They're——"

"How do you know? Been seein' a lot of 'em, huh? I heard there was a girl."

Stormy steel-gray eyes met level brown ones. Frank John had his mother's eyes. Abruptly then old John balled his hands into hard knots, took a step forward.

"True, ain't it? I heard the punchers talkin'. They said you'd fell hard for a damned nester's daughter. To think that my own kid——"

"Dad, Lucy Harkness is a fine girl. If you'd just see her and get to know her you'd——"

"That's enough, young man. You'll go out to that camp on 'Leven Mile and get that quarter of beef. You'll promise me never to go near that trash again, never to see this fortune-huntin' girl again, or——"

"Wait a second, you stubborn, unreasonable old——"

"Were you about to call me an old fool? It's you that's the fool, son. You can't put old heads on young shoulders, more's the pity. In five years you'll thank me for this. Think 'er over, son. You're playin'

this hand with me or against me, your own father. Which is it? I'm goin' to do somethin' I should have done before—run out them damned squatters."

"Dad!" cried young Frank John. "Will you listen to reason? You yourself homesteaded. You——"

"That ain't the point. Don't try to argue with me. You—you've disappointed me again and again. You're breakin' me all up now with your damn foolishness. But I can still carry on and fight without you unless you'll be the man I always hoped you would be and fight with me. Where you goin', son?"

"I'm leavin', dad. Good night!"

Frank John Roberts tugged his hat down over his eyes, stepped to the door, opened it. But his father's grasp halted him.

"Leavin'? Better stop and think what you're doin'. If you walk out on me you can't never come back—'less you show hoss sense and fight with me, not agin' me. Goin', anyhow?"

The old man's voice sounded as if he could not believe Frank John would actually leave him. But the young man went quickly out and the door closed.

OLD John Roberts, range veteran and pioneer cattleman, standing fixed and immobile, staring at the closed door, heard the roan horse going away into the night. Perhaps three minutes later he flung into his bedroom, changed his shirt, put on a necktie, buckled on his gun and his spurs, jabbed a hat down over his graying hair, and stamped across the living room to the kitchen.

"Suds," he growled to the cook who was washing dishes there, "my kid's quit me. Quit me like a steer in the road."

"So solly, boss! Mebbeso it can be fix."

"Fix? Hell!" snorted Roberts. "When that kid gets his neck bowed he's jus' like me."

"Has been a velly long time showing it, though. Where to now, boss man?"

"Town. To get drunk!" The old man stamped out, shoulders bent just a little, otherwise as belligerent as any range bull.

He did not pause at the bunk house, place of light and laughter, where a part of his cow-punching crew joshed each other, spun yarns.

Through the open door old John Roberts heard and saw this carefree, happy crew at rest after the day's work, and he scowled, just because he wanted to fight somebody and hated to see anybody happy when he himself was—well, he was goin' through plain hell.

He noted the horse with the packsaddle on it at the stable door. Frank John hadn't lingered to unsaddle it and turn it out in the pasture. Such neglect of a slight chore made the old man fume afresh. He yanked off the packsaddle and threw it savagely on the ground. He turned loose the horse, saddled his own favorite mount, a powerful black.

And then he rode two sides of a triangle to reach the town of Dunn Horse—two sides of a triangle because he went past the settlers' camp on Eleven Mile Creek. The stream tumbled down from the mountains on the west and flowed into Titan River approximately eleven miles from the foot of the range; hence its odd name.

Not until this evening had old John Roberts visited the Harkness camp. He knew that family had been there for a month, had been fretting about the situation, but he

had steered clear of them because he hoped his neighbor cow outfit, the Bell Seven, would take the initiative and railroad the damned squatters.

"Bell Seven" Kramer hadn't as much at stake as Roberts, for his outfit was dinky and one-horse compared with the mighty JR, but Kramer was the kind of a man a fellow would expect to jump on a nester roughshod, and so Roberts had waited.

"Waited," as he now told himself harshly, "to find his fool of a kid had gone and tumbled for a squatter's gal; had even started feedin' the tribe; and, to cap the climax, had ridden out on his own dad."

THERE was a cheery camp fire blazing on Eleven Mile Creek, a couple of hobbled horses in the foreground; beyond, a picketed milk cow, a wagon stripped to its running gears, a tent with lamplight showing through it, and a new cabin built of logs, roofed with poles, but not yet covered with earth, not yet occupied.

Roberts rode in closer. Two people sat by the fire—a girl and an oldish man, rail-thin, tired-faced. But the girl—young, dark, with bright eyes—was vibrant with youth and vitality. She sprang erect as she heard a horse approaching, and John Roberts, hating her, had to admit that she was winsome, attractive, pretty. Somehow she reminded the grim old cowman of the woman he had loved, Frank John's mother.

"Hello!" she called.

Roberts merely grunted, riding right into the circle of firelight. He could see the shadow of some one else inside the tent, and the man by the fire shuffled to his worn-out shoes, stood hitching up his overalls and fastening one suspender which had slipped.

A moment's silence, then the homesteader said: "Evenin', stranger. Light off."

"Your name Harkness? This your layout?" demanded old John gruffly.

"Yes, sir. You're——"

The girl's bright eyes were fixed intently on the rancher's granitelike features, and he felt disconcerted, at a loss. This talking harsh to women wasn't in his line, but——

"You're on cattle range, feller," growled Roberts. "Pack up and get goin' afore sunup to-morrow mornin'. John Roberts o' the JR outfit's tellin' yuh. G'night!"

He dug in his spurs, anxious to be elsewhere, and, as the black snorted loping away, old John Roberts felt ashamed of himself. This only served to make him all the more angry. Yet his anger was mingled with grief. His kid, who never had shown his mettle, quitting him that way, disappointing him, taking up with——

Never had the obstinate range man been quite so cranky as he reined a dripping wet, panting horse to a halt in front of McGuffy's saloon on the main street of Dunn Horse. He stamped inside and had swallowed three glasses of raw whisky before he became aware that citizens and cowboys, freighters and ranchers, inside the drink emporium, were staring at him strangely.

He had invited no one to join him, had paid no attention to any one except the bartender, who was even more amazed than the patrons of the saloon. For "Smilin' Dan" had never before seen John Roberts on a high lonesome.

"Let 'em gawp," thought old John.

Then his stormy gaze focused on

Bell Seven Kramer, a wiry little man, sharp-featured, and with the eyes of a fox, who was playing poker with four others.

"Hey, come have a snorter with me, Bell Seven."

Kramer tossed his hand into the discard and joined the owner of the JR at once. He filled his glass.

"Here's lookin' at you, Roberts. How's everything? Grass and water holdin' out good on your range?"

"Huh? Oh, I guess so. Kramer," he added in a lower tone, which none the less was heard by the bartender, "my kid's quit me."

Kramer looked straight at the rugged old cowman. "I'm damn sorry, John!"

"Hell! I don't want none of your sympathy. Fill 'em up, Dan. Kramer," again Roberts spoke in a guarded tone, "I just told them damned squatters to pull their freight."

"So? Frank John's quit you, and you told them settlers to pull their freight?"

Behind his upraised whisky glass, Bell Seven Kramer hid a sly grin. From long range he had observed young Frank John call at the Harkness camp several times in the past month; just this afternoon he had seen that quarter of beef delivered.

"Have one on me, Roberts," Kramer resumed. "Then I got to be driftin' along. You ridin' out home yet to-night?" he added casually.

"Course I'm ridin' home yet to-night. That is, if I can fork my nag after—— Fill 'em up again, Dan."

Bell Seven Kramer left soon after this.

John Roberts remained glued to the bar, and as the liquor took effect he mellowed, inviting all hands to line up.

"The drinks are on me, fellers. You ain't damned squatters nor sheepherders. I've smoked sheepherders off my range many a time. I'm tough to handle when I get snorty. I'll smoke some squatters out afore I'm through. Aich you boy! Powder River! Fill 'em up, Dan, ol' boy! Le's drink, men!"

It was midnight when he took a sudden notion to go home—for no apparent reason. Four husky men scarcely less tottery than the tough old cowman helped him get astride his gentle black horse. They tied the bridle reins to the saddle horn and in the bright starlight watched old John Roberts' black take the trail to the JR Ranch.

"That hoss'll get him thar—'less he falls off."

"He ain't goin' to roll outa his kack; not that snorty ol' warrior."

Soon thereafter Smilin' Dan, having closed the saloon, bethought him of something. The bartender had imbibed freely himself, but he recalled certain wild threats John Roberts had made against the settlers on Eleven Mile. Smilin' Dan made an erratic course to the sheriff's office, and when he had awakened Sheriff Joe Carstairs, Dan gave the peace officer an earful, concluding:

"Maybe you had better ought to lope out to 'Leven Mile Crick, Joe."

The sheriff thought so, too.

MEANWHILE, young Frank John, leaving the JR, had headed due south without caring where he went, just so long as it was away from his father's ranch. For a time he rode in a sort of blind fury against his parent. Unreasonable, bull-headed old John could see only one side of any argument—his side.

He was against the Harkness family, against the girl without having even seen her, red-hot mad at his son because Frank John had befriended the settlers, provided them with food, and because—— Well, the cowboy admitted to himself that he had indeed fallen for Lucy Harkness.

He began to think about the girl. Old man Harkness didn't amount to much, but she was just the salt of the earth.

She had confided to Frank John how the family couldn't get ahead in town, where Dad Harkness' pay check was generally spent before he got it. Lucy and her mother had had a hard time getting along—a very hard time. They'd induced Harkness to head for the open range and try to become a rancher. Possibly, somehow, they could get started and begin to realize what had always been a dream of ambition to the girl.

"And I tried to help 'em," muttered Frank John. "But dad—huh?"

It was an awful wrench to be thus leaving the old man, and never had the young cow-puncher been so mixed up in his own mind. He could go back home. Old John had left the gate open. Should he do it? Leaving as he was, he could not expect to do the Harkness family much good. All he could get now was a riding job at forty a month.

And of a certainty it would be years and years before he could ever accumulate enough to ask Lucy to share his fortunes. Come to think of it seriously, he was throwing away a fortune, his future.

Frank John reined up and looked at the silent night, at the wide range land where in the starlight a herd of cattle were bedded, chewing their cuds, happy. Where a nighthawk winged its way across the sky, and far away a lone coyote voiced his song, which was presently answered by several of his neighbors. The weird yapping bothered Frank John not at all. In fact, he heard it only mechanically. Tumult was in his mind.

"But I can't go home," he growled. "Can't, 'cause there's a string tied to dad's offer to let me come back. I'd have to side with him against the settlers—against Lucy. I'm leavin'. But first I'll go see her again—for perhaps the last time. Tell her I'm goin'."

Frank John was unaware of how far to the south his roan had carried him, and now as he hurried back across the hills and valleys, loping north, with the grand old mountains that he loved to the west, he glanced at his watch to find that it was after eleven.

The settlers would be in bed. He couldn't rout Lucy out at this hour. What was that ahead? Looked like the flare of fire. Frank John smelled smoke, too. There was a fire—a big one—in the valley of Eleven Mile Creek. The cowboy fed his roan the steel.

Sagebrush hills and flats cut by grassy valleys sped under flying hoofs, while fear and stark horror rode with Frank John Roberts. His father, in a choking rage, had said he'd run out those "damned squatters." He must have set fire to their——

The roan's drumming hoofs reached the last hill and directly ahead lay the valley of Eleven Mile, in which red tongues of flame leaped skyward, fiery showers of sparks, billowing smoke. A tent and a new log cabin were both going up in flames. In the wide circle of light cast by these fires, Frank John saw two human figures, both women.

The man, Harkness, he could not see, just Lucy and her mother standing off to the side, watching their home, their possessions, burn.

The cowboy felt a mingling surge of pity and of unreasoning anger. The man who had done this horrible thing to defenseless homesteaders was lower than a snake in a wagon track. If it was his own father, he'd——

Off to the west sounded the thud of hoofs. The dastard who'd set the fire was running out. Without approaching the women of the burning camp, Frank John gave chase by sound rather than sight. However, within three miles he had gained on the lone horseman until not over a hundred yards separated them. And Frank John knew a relief such as he never before had experienced. It was not his father whom he was trailing. It was Bell Seven Kramer.

HALTING and turning to face the oncoming rider, Kramer now waited with a gun in his fist. Frank John realized that any man despicable enough to fire a settler's camp was quite capable of murder. Yet the cowboy rode steadily forward, to pull up within ten feet of the owner of the Bell Seven.

Two pairs of eyes locked and clashed, and for a moment neither man spoke. Frank John, the guileless young cow-puncher, heretofore as happy-go-lucky and don't-give-a-hoot ranny as ever "topped a snorty bronc," meeting the cunning old fox of the range, Bell Seven Kramer.

"You raised hell an' put a prop under it," said the cowboy hoarsely. "If you'll put up that cannon I'll black both your eyes, ram your teeth down your gullet and jar your liver loose from your backbone—if you got any backbone."

"Button your lip, you cheerful young idiot," retorted the other. "Me, I'm a-holdin' tight to this smoke-wagon and I figger I'll jus' let you cool your hot head in my cellar. I can do that all jake, 'cause you're s'posed to have headed out. Nobody'll be a-lookin' for you. Unbuckle your gun belt with your left hand and let 'er slide. Hump yourself or my thumb'll slip off this gun hammer."

Frank John fumbled with his belt buckle. "I s'pose you allow my dad'll get full credit fer what you just done, Kramer?"

"Now you mentions it, he will shore 'nuff. He was makin' plenty war talk thar in Dunn Horse. I used a mask an' took pains to let them Harkness women believe I was old John Roberts. Hi! What——"

Spur-ripped, Frank John's horse tornadoed forward. There was the roar of a gun, powder burning the cowboy's face, the bullet itself humming through empty air. Frank John was out of his saddle. His left hand had Kramer's gun wrist. His right circled the rancher's body. A snorting horse was leaping away. Two human figures thudding to the dark ground and writhing there. A muffled oath. The smash of a fist driving home, and then Frank John scrambling to his feet, jerking Kramer, with blood spurting from his flattened nose, erect.

"Now, you damned whelp," panted the cowboy, "you're goin' to do just what I say for you to do."

Bell Seven Kramer offered no reply. He was in no condition to talk just then. Grimly Frank John prodded the man along ahead of him until they caught both saddle horses. In silence they rode on to the Bell Seven Ranch, lying along a clear mountain stream.

The cowboy knew Kramer had five hundred Bell Seven cattle on

the range, though he employed only two hired hands. Frank John was acquainted with these hands, thought they were square-shooters, so, tying Kramer to a corral post, he went to interview the men at the bunk house. As he lighted the lamp, they sat up in their bunks, staring owlishly at the grim-jawed ranny.

"Listen, Jake, Terry, Kramer burned out the settlers on 'Leven Mile. I'm callin' his hand. You boys playin' with him or not?"

"I'm steerin' clear o' any such dirty, underhanded business," stated Terry, and Jake nodded agreement to his partner's words.

"Then get your clothes, wrangle the hosses, and shove out," snapped Frank John, who never until this night had been so aggressive and commanding. "How much you got comin'? I'll take it on myself to pay you off. You meddle in this deal or try to help Kramer, and my gun'll shore smoke plenty."

Jake and Terry scrambled into their clothes, mentioned the amount of wages which Kramer owed them, left their guns in the bunk house as a peace sign, and went out to wrangle the horses. Half an hour later they were gone, with their wages in their pockets, their war sacks behind their saddles. Gone with Bell Seven Kramer snarling after them that they were yellow-bellied quitters who left a man in the lurch.

TWO HOURS later Kramer arrived at the Harkness claim on Eleven Mile, driving an almost new wagon complete with box, bows, and wagon sheet. A flinty-eyed cowboy rode beside the rancher's team, leading Kramer's saddle horse. Bell Seven Kramer seemed to have a tremendous respect for this cowboy.

Mrs. Harkness and Lucy were still at the camp, now a smoldering bed of hot ashes, and as the wagon halted, Lucy recognized the cowboy. But she did not leave her mother's side to join him. Instead she called in a hurt and tragic voice:

"Your contemptible old father's done us enough damage, so we certainly don't want to see you."

"Stop right here, Kramer," ordered Frank John. "Now hop down, unhook the team, and let 'em go home."

Kramer unhitched the team. The two harnessed horses promptly headed back for the Bell Seven. The women drew closer, so close that Frank John could see their tear-streaked faces.

"What are you doing?" asked Mrs. Harkness.

"Hand her the bill of sale for the wagon, Kramer," commanded the ranny. "Give her the cash I made you dig up, and the paper saying you're paying for burning 'em out."

Bell Seven Kramer obeyed, Mrs. Harkness taking two slips of paper and a sack of money wonderingly.

"But, Frank John, it was your father who set fire to our camp!" cried the girl. "He came early, threatened us. Came back later with his face masked, ordered us out of bed, said he was John Roberts. And what in the world has he done with dad?"

"Kramer, what'd you do with Harkness?" flashed Frank John.

"I dunno nawthin' 'bout him," grunted Kramer.

The girl was going on: "The sheriff came just a little while ago. He caught old John Roberts here within a hundred yards of our camp. The sheriff handcuffed Roberts, then he came and told us there wasn't any doubt but what the old man was guilty. He'd been drinking in

town and making terrible threats against us."

"What's all this?" demanded the cowboy. "Lucy, you don't really think my dad—— You say Sheriff Carstairs caught him here, arrested him?"

"Yes, and Carstairs has taken him to jail. Frank John, I once thought you—— Well, no matter what I thought. Of course you're trying to cover up his guilt and yours by forcing Mr. Kramer at the point of a gun to——"

"That's it exactly, miss!" shouted Kramer.

" 'Nuff outa you," snapped Frank John. "Fork this horse. We're headin' for town. Lucy, Mrs. Harkness, hang onto that money and those slips of paper, too. Be seein' you again——"

Soft plodding of hoofs as the starlit night hid the two riders from Lucy's eyes. She looked at the wagon, at the money in her mother's possession, and she gasped: "I wonder if we're dreaming?"

"What you aimin' to do with me?" Kramer demanded.

"You'll be s'prised, Kramer. After you clear the old gent and after you sell your outfit to me, you can fan the breeze."

"Huh? You ain't goin' to have me locked up?"

"No."

The two rode silently into Dunn Horse.

On the main street Frank John spoke again: "We'll go to the banker's house first, Kramer. Old Tom Potter once told me he'd stake me. I'll see if he will."

An hour later, almost morning, Sheriff Joe Carstairs, who'd been taking a nap in his jail office, woke up to gape at Bell Seven Kramer and a hard-eyed young cowboy named Frank John Roberts.

"Frank John," he burst out, "thar ain't a bit o' use your arguin' with me 'bout lettin' the old gent out. He's got to take his medicine. I heard you and him had tangled and you'd left home. What you doin' here, anyhow?"

"You tell him, Kramer."

"I—uh, well, it's this way, Joe. That fire on 'Leven Mile—I done it."

"You done it? You admit it! I'm lockin' you up, Kramer."

"No," said Frank John.

Behind the three men in the office a rugged old face at the door of a cell had appeared, and a pair of bloodshot eyes were looking through the bars. John Roberts was now cold sober. He had been sober ever since on his way home he had seen the fire, had headed toward it, and had been surprised by the sheriff. Now he was watching his son, listening to him, and how the old man enjoyed the way his kid said "No" to Sheriff Carstairs!

"Who're you to be tellin' me what to do?" demanded Carstairs truculently.

"I'm the man who brought in the guilty coyote, settled everything, and cleared my dad," replied Frank John. "I told Kramer if he came clean he could manufacture a bunch of hot tracks, Joe. That promise holds."

"Like hell!" bellowed Carstairs. "This geezer's guilty. I'm arrestin' him——"

"You ain't arrestin' nobody, sheriff." A large gun had appeared in Frank John's hand, pointed straight at Joe Carstairs' nose. "Get out of here, Kramer," ordered the cowboy.

And Bell Seven Kramer went.

A moment later those in the jail heard the thump of his horse's hoofs going away into the morning light,

swelling across the range land from the east.

From his cell old John Roberts shouted: "By grab! Keep up the pace, kid. You're shore doin' noble! I'm proud o' you."

Joe Carstairs looked unwinkingly at the gun. He was silent a moment, then: "You can stick it in the leather, Frank John. After all, you handled this touchy business better'n the law ever handles anything—if I say it as shouldn't. Gimme them keys yonder above the desk. I'll be lettin' out your dad."

Frank John started to leave.

The old man called: "Wait, son!" He came out of the cell, walked over to confront the young cowboy, and the stubborn old-timer was holding out his hand. "Kid, you ain't a kid no more. You have showed you're a man. S'posin' we forget las' night and——"

"Afraid there's no use, dad. I—I might as well say it blunt. I love Lucy Harkness, and you——"

"Damn fine girl, son! Never re'lized it till I seen her. Grab her if she'll take you. I—we'll split the ol' ranch, give the two of you a chunk o' it, and——"

"I got a ranch of my own, dad."

Something had swelled up in young Frank John's throat, almost choking him. The old man was offering to make up!

"Huh? Whar'd you get a ranch? What with? What ranch?"

"The Bell Seven, dad. Banker Potter's handlin' the loan. Kramer's got his money. I got the deed."

"You don't mean it, son! Smoky Cow! I'm a heap prouder of you than I was. You shore came through las' night, Frank John Roberts. Shake!"

They gripped hands hard, eyes misty. Anyhow, they looked that way to the sheriff of Dunn Horse; looked that way also to the radiant, flushed girl who entered the sheriff's quarters. Frank John whirled to face her, still holding his father's gnarled hand.

"Why—why, Lucy!"

"Oh, Frank John, father came home. He had been caught by Kramer and tied. But the minute he got loose he came to see about mother and me and told us. So I came to tell the sheriff that——"

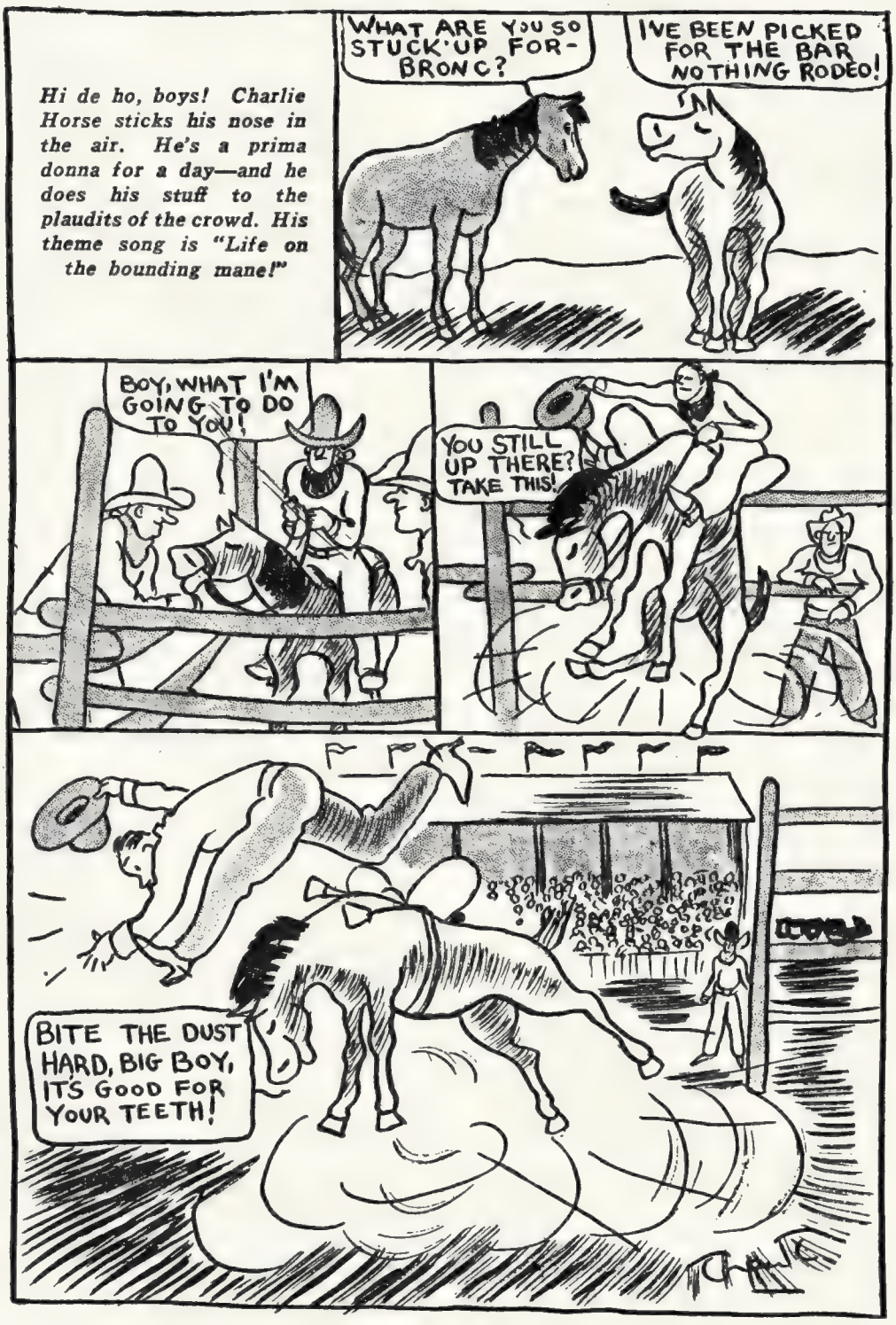
"No need of tellin' me nothin', young woman," interrupted Joe Carstairs. "Hi, Roberts, let's you and me amble over to the saloon an' see if we can get us an eye-opener."

"Ain't our old eyes been opened a-plenty?" asked John Roberts. He released his son's hand, clamped his own on the shoulder of Lucy Harkness, said gently for him, "You'll do to take along, girl. Good luck to you both," and walked out with the sheriff.

Frank John watched them for a moment, going along the squeaky plank sidewalk together, cowman and officer, grizzled old-timers both. Then he looked directly at Lucy Harkness and smiled into her luminous eyes, seeing there exactly what he hoped to see.

THE BAR NOTHING "TAKE A BITE"

Next Month: "My Operation."


Hi de ho, boys! Charlie Horse sticks his nose in the air. He's a prima donna for a day—and he does his stuff to the plaudits of the crowd. His theme song is "Life on the bounding mane!"
WHAT ARE YOU SO STUCK UP FOR-BRONC?
I'VE BEEN PICKED FOR THE BAR NOTHING RODEO!
BOY, WHAT I'M GOING TO DO TO YOU!
YOU STILL UP THERE? TAKE THIS!
BITE THE DUST HARD, BIG BOY, IT'S GOOD FOR YOUR TEETH!

SKELETON

IT WAS "Red" Barron's idea in the first place, and that of course meant that it would be harebrained. For any two men to attempt to comb the illimitable mesas and desert valleys between the Gila and the Harqua Hallas in search of the worst killer that the then Territory of Arizona had ever known would have been ludicrous if danger had not stalked every trail. But neither Red nor his sidekick, "Blaze" Vickers, was given to considering consequences.

Twice had "El Lobo" struck, once at a trading post on Bill Williams Fork, and more recently the bank at Eagle had been gutted. Each time the bandits—for El Lobo had a score of riders with him—had vanished into the mesas and hills that flanked the Harqua Halla Mountains. The authorities at Phoenix had fumed and increased the re-

SPRING

by H. M. Sutherland

A novelette of double-barrelled action in the sand country

"It's murder," said Red harshly. "Look at this!"

wards until some six thousand dollars awaited the man who brought El Lobo in, regardless of the state of preservation.

Blaze Vickers drew rein on the crest of a slight swell that overlooked a forlorn valley. Tumbleweed and scattered patches of greasewood stretched in an almost endless vista, and Blaze, after a

searching glance, tossed his leg over the horn of his saddle and rolled a cigarette.

"Well?" His tone was gently remonstrative as he half wheeled and looked at Red. "You got any more ideas on the prod?"

Red removed his huge sombrero and mopped his perspiring brow with his bandanna. For a long minute he let his glance seek the far places.

"Water hole over there, some'res," he declared, pointing vaguely in the direction of a low, sage-covered hill across the valley. "Figgered we'd camp there to-night."

"Know where we are?"

"About ten mile east o' Hernandez Rocks. The Granite Wash Mountains are over on the left. Harqua Hallas are more to the north.

Blaze scratched his head thoughtfully. "You know, Red, the more I think o' this damn-fool idea o' ridin' into El Lobo's camp an' joinin' up with him, the more foolish it looks. He ain't goin' to fall for no play like that."

"You white-eyin', Blaze?" Red arched his eyebrows.

"Nope. I'm ridin' through to the round-up."

"Keno!" murmured Red and struck out across the valley toward the distant hills.

At the end of some three hours they drew near a thick clump of mesquite, and Blaze was the first to catch sight of a bit of green back near the base of a low line of red cliffs. A few minutes later they and their mounts were slaking a long thirst in water that was surprisingly cool.

They rested a bit, and then Red walked away from the water hole among the mesquite to gather a few sticks of wood to boil coffee. Blaze remained motionless. A smothered ejaculation from Red brought Blaze to his feet with his hands gripping his rifle.

"Come here, Blaze!" called Red softly.

He was standing in a small depression some twenty feet distant, and it required but a few strides to bring Blaze to the brink.

Down in the leaves and sand in the bottom of the sink hole gleamed the skeleton of a man, and beside him were scattered what seemed to be the contents of a pack, including a canteen, a frying pan, and several bits of moldering cloth. All of these things Blaze took in at a glance, and he shrugged with the realization that it marked another of the bitter tragedies of the desert. It was undoubtedly some old prospector who had found the end of his trail in these drab and lonely surroundings.

"Come down here, Blaze," insisted Red, and Blaze obeyed, walking on his toes as if fearful of disturbing the silences that blanketed the place.

"It's murder, man," continued Red sharply. "Look at this."

WITH the toe of his boot Red indicated the skull, and one glance was enough for Blaze to notice the round hole just above the temple.

Almost at the same instant a bright object caught Blaze's attention, and he stooped and caught up a fragment of cloth. It was the band of the overall breeches that the old prospector had worn, and among the shreds glistened a nugget of gold the size of a pea. A closer investigation brought to light nine other nuggets of approximately the same size.

"They had been sewed inside the band of his overalls," declared Blaze

at last. "That's how his killer missed them. Say, but he had shore struck it rich somewhere!"

Red was hunting among the remnants of the rotted pack, but seemed to find nothing of interest. Blaze kicked the inverted frying pan with his toe and turned it over. Then he stooped with a gasp and stared at its rusted bottom.

A map plainly had been scratched on the inner surface of the pan. The action of several months of rusting had defaced it in places, but for the most part it was clear and detailed. The work had apparently been done with a knife or some sharply pointed instrument, and there was no doubt in Blaze's mind but that it showed the location of the place in which those gold nuggets had been found.

Red gave expression to a low whistle of surprise as he stared over Blaze's shoulder. "Do you reckon that's the map showin' where he found it?" he asked softly.

"Of course! An' from the arrow pointin' to that circle, I'd say that is the exact spot. Wonder what the SP. stands for?"

"Spring, more'n likely. The old boy wasn't much on spellin', seems like. That TH. down there at the bottom—that kinda looks like a thumb. An' Saddle is what he aimed at up at the top. Sunk Creek means one o' them creeks that dry up in the sand an'——"

Red straightened suddenly and ran one hand through his sanded thatch, his eyes staring unseeingly into the distance.

"Blaze," he murmured gently as if afraid that the very desert had ears, "I know right where that place is. I made camp on that Sunk Creek one night about four years ago—me an' Mogollon Bill. I recollect that thumb turned back'ard in the hills to the south o' that creek, an' we rode right by them painted rocks marked on that map. Man," he exulted, "I can lead us plum to that spot with my eyes shut!"

"How far is it from here?" demanded Blaze skeptically.

"Ten-twelve miles. We can be there in three hours." He glanced at the sun. "Come on! Le's get goin'."

Red had the gold fever, and Blaze knew that nothing could stop him until he had investigated that Sunk Creek territory.

"Ain't this the region in which the Lost Soldier Mine is supposed to be?" called Red over his shoulder as they quitted the mesquite.

"Somewhere near the Granite Wash Range," replied Blaze. "That ain't far west o' here, is it?"

"Day's ride, mebbe. Do you recollect any o' the facts about that lost mine?"

"Some." Blaze rolled and lighted a cigarette as Red dropped back beside him. "As I recall it," he resumed, " 'twas back several years ago that a hombre named McKeever an' his fam'ly was ambushed at their ranch in the big bend o' the Gila by a war party o' Apaches. All o' them was killed except one daughter, Belle, which the Indians took away with 'em. Troopers took the trail after 'em.

"The Apaches, findin' that they was bein' followed, split up, an' scattered in ever' direction. The soldiers split up, too, with detachments of two or three followin' each trail. One o' these bodies was made up o' three soldiers—a sergeant named Crossman or Crosswaite, an' two privates named Wormley an' Flannagan. They got lost in the hills, probably the Granite Wash, an' two o' their hosses died. Their grub also run short.

"They struck out northeast,

huntin' water, an' they found it in some mountains which they said was like a saddleback. They camped beside a spring the first night, an' the next mornin' they saw that the spring was just natur'lly lined with gold nuggets. Up above the spring a few steps was a outcrop of granite containin' a quartz vein sixteen feet thick. Outta this quartz the troopers could dig coarse gold with their knives.

"They loaded about fifty pounds o' this quartz on the one remainin' hoss an' headed south. 'Twas the dry season, an' they run out o' water, an' by the time they got close to the Gila ag'in, the hoss dropped dead, an' the three soldiers split up an' kept on pluggin' ahead. Wormley got to the river an' found aid. They went back an' found Flannagan unconscious an' just about dead. When they found the sergeant he was beyond all help.

"They found the dead hoss also an' took that ore in to a smelter where she assayed eighteen hundred dollars in fifty pounds o' ore. Wormley an' Flannagan spent the rest o' their lives tryin' to find that spring an' that vein o' ore, but they never could find it. That's the tale as I heard her."

Red remained silent for a full minute and then he shrugged expressively.

"That's the funny thing about this here country—Big Valley in partic'lar. She's allus exactly the same, yet she never looks the same twict in a row. A feller sometimes thinks he's got hisself located when he ain't. But, Blaze, as shore as there's a hell, I believe we've got this here famous Lost Soldier Mine located."

"If we find that spring," Blaze remarked.

"Huh! I told you I could find this Sunk Creek with my eyes shut."

NEVERTHELESS Red glanced about him half apprehensively as if to assure himself of his landmarks. The vivid colors in the west softened and cooled to a monotonous gray, and the encroaching shadows dimmed the outline of the more distant objects. The incessant yapping of coyotes in the distance was the only sound to break the stillness, save the occasional click of a horse's hoof against a stone.

Through the gathering night they rode steadily, and at last a thin moon appeared over the crest of the hills to the east to cast its uncertain light over the vast monotony of the valley. Suddenly Red's horse whinnied and increased his pace.

"Water!" murmured Red with a sigh of relief.

They dipped into a slight depression, and Blaze saw that the vegetation about them was growing luxuriant. His mount wanted to go down the draw, but Red was of a different opinion and swung north at right angles to what appeared to be the dry bed of the creek. Blaze could smell water somewhere close, and Red was probably following his nose in that direction.

A tongue of flame, followed by the roar of a heavy-calibered gun, leaped toward them from the shadows directly ahead of them. Blaze felt the air stir on his cheek, so closely did the bullet pass him, and he dropped to the ground and reached for his gun as he threw himself prostrate among the shrubs.

Red was beside him an instant later, and they hugged the ground closely, expecting other shots from the covert before them. Their horses fled back along the trail.

II.

STRAINING his eyes, Blaze tried vainly to pierce the darkness ahead. Fervently he hoped that their attacker would move, or by some sound expose his position. To fire at the point from which the shot had been fired would of course be foolish because the marksman had changed his position instantly.

Out of the intense stillness came a strange sound—a hiccup—and Red chuckled softly.

"Hey, Higgins!" he called guardedly. "Don't shoot. We're friends."

"Why the hell didn't ye say so?"

A cracked querulous voice announced the presence of the speaker some six or eight feet to the right of the point where he had opened fire.

Blaze laughed. That voice belonged to old "Hiccups" Higgins, one of the best-known desert rats on the border, who under the stress of unusual excitement was given to hiccups over which he had no control whatever.

"Who are ye, anyhow?" called Higgins from a new position, plainly unconvinced of the friendliness of his visitors.

"Red Barron. Blaze Vickers is with me."

"What do ye tarnation fools mean by ridin' in on a man atter dark thataway? Have ye lost what leetle sense ye had?" He came shuffling out of the shadows and shook hands with them. "I reckon I'm right glad ye boys showed up. Looks like I've done bit off more'n I can chew plum successful."

"So you've located a strike here, have you?" queried Blaze.

"Who told ye that?"

Blaze could feel the old man's eyes boring into him.

Then Higgins apparently came to a quick and final decision: "I don't mind tellin' ye, boys, that I've hit it right this time. Free gold in the grass roots. Never expected to see nothin' like it. Then thar's a vein o' quartz clost by that's the biggest in the State of Arizony. The only trouble is, that danged breed killer, El Lobo, is hangin' aroun' here too clost for comfort. I've seen his gang two-three times in the last week, an' I'm afeard to leave here long enough to get my claim filed."

"El Lobo?" ejaculated Red, coming closer. "Say, that's the hombre we're after. Whereabouts does he hang out?"

"In the hills to the no'th, an' I shore hope ye get him, son. 'Twill save a sight o' trouble."

"You campin' at a gravel spring?" asked Blaze after a slight silence.

"Eh?" Again the old prospector whirled toward Blaze. "Son, seems like ye know a heap o' things."

"An' that quartz vein somethin' like sixteen feet thick?"

"Well, ye can skin me for a sidewinder!" Higgins hiccuped again. "Had ye done located this strike?"

"No." Blaze laughed. "But it looks like you've done found the Lost Soldier Mine."

"I kinda had some sich idee. Well, boys, what I was aimin' to say a while ago was that she's big enough for all three of us. From now on we're splittin' three ways on ever'thing—that is, if ye're willin'. Offhand I'd say that we're facin' plenty o' trouble if we hold it ag'in' El Lobo an' his gang." He paused for a brief instant. "I say, boys, how'd ye happen to come a-ridin' in here at this time o' night?"

"We was on the scout for ol' Lobo," explained Red, "an' we found a map scratched inside a

fryin' pan which showed us the location of this here Lost Soldier Mine. That fryin' pan belonged to some prospector who'd located this place."

"I'll bet 'twas ol' Skyline Pete," murmured Higgins softly. "He was headed in this country a leetle more'n a year ago when I seen him last. An' that gravel aroun' the spring has been prospected some—washed a leetle. Know what become o' Pete? Ust to be a pardner o' mine."

"There was a skeleton back there where we found that pan," replied Red gently. "The skull had a bullet hole in it."

"So?" There was a slight quaver in the old man's tones. "'Twas the Lobo, o' course. Another reason why we've got to squar' accounts with that devil. Come on! Le's catch your hosses an' bed down at my camp. I reckon we can chanct a fire to-night. I'm honin' for a cup o' coffee. Been eatin' jerky an' drinkin' water for a week, not darin' to cook any."

They tethered the horses where the grass was thickest, and Red and Blaze gathered about a frugal fire while old Higgins garrulously set about making the coffee.

"O' course they found some o' these nuggets on Pete," he growled, "an' that explains why they've been stickin' so clost to these hills ever since they waylaid him. They been huntin' for this gold, an' makin' raids along to keep 'em in grub."

"Find any o' them nuggets, Higgins?" asked Red, unable to repress his curiosity.

For reply old Higgins dug under the sand at the edge of his makeshift shelter and drew out a buckskin sack. Carelessly he tossed it to Red, who let it fall through his hands. The drawstrings were loose, and a pile of nuggets scattered at Red's feet.

Red swore in amazement. His fingers trembled as he strove to gather the nuggets up. "Take a look at this, Blaze."

BLAZE realized that he was breathing hard as he leaned forward and picked up a lump of the stuff as large as the first joint of his thumb. It was a rich find and no mistake about that.

Near the spring stood a tree more than two feet in diameter and with spreading branches that reached a height of perhaps forty feet. To Blaze's surprise it proved to be a mesquite tree, by far the largest he had ever seen. In the deeper shadows of this tree, and some little distance from the embers of the fire, they rolled themselves in their blankets, and almost instantly snores from Red and Higgins resounded in discordant unison.

Blaze tried to sleep, but restlessness seized him. He turned and tried ineffectually to find a more comfortable position. At last he gave up the effort and sat up against the bole of the tree and rolled a cigarette. Over him crept the feeling that they were being watched, and he arose cautiously to his feet and drew near to the glowing embers of the fire.

A few handfuls of sand were enough to smother the last coal, and then he made his way out into the mesa above the spring. Beside a smooth-faced boulder he crouched and strained his ears for any unusual sound that might mark the presence of lurking danger.

Although no untoward noise broke the stillness, Blaze knew that some one was drawing in close to the spring. Perhaps it was premonition, but he did not question it.

His tension increased, and softly he drew his gun and cocked it, carefully pressing the trigger to prevent the telltale click.

It was with little surprise that he at last saw a moving shadow crawling along a slight trough in the lava ahead of him. In the indistinct moonlight he was unable to distinguish its outlines, but he could see sufficiently well to determine the fact that it was a man who knew how to stalk like a cougar.

For a long minute Blaze watched this figure, and with quickened pulse he realized that if the man continued along his present line of advance he must pass within three feet of the shadows in which Blaze crouched. Soundlessly he arose to a position from which he could leap upon the intruder, and, hardly daring to breathe, he drew away from the boulder for fear that his clothing might make a scratching sound when he moved.

The crawling man palpably was an Indian or at least a breed, because few white men could accomplish the feat of crawling so swiftly and so silently on that jagged and uneven terrain. He seemed to be wriggling his way forward like a snake, and indeed there was a hint of a deadly reptile in his movements.

Not more than ten or twelve feet away from Blaze, the stalker halted, and Blaze's blood froze in his veins. He was tempted to open fire because he expected to see the flash of a gun stab at him during each of several endless seconds. He smothered a gasp of relief when the shadow came on toward him.

The capture must be made without sound, for others of El Lobo's gang were probably close. Blaze was hopeful, however, that the man was alone, a spy sent to find out who had built that betraying fire at the spring.

The stalker was close now, not more than eight feet away, and here he paused again. The old silver watch in Blaze's pocket sounded to him like the beat of a hammer on an anvil, and he wondered why the other man did not hear it. But the outlaw seemed intent upon the spring, for his face was turned in that direction, and he remained perfectly motionless.

At the first move on his part to resume his crawling, Blaze leaped. He landed squarely astride the man's shoulders, and he struck viciously at his head with the barrel of his gun. The man twisted sideways with amazing agility, and Blaze grunted as he hit the rock beneath with his fist. He dropped the gun and grabbed for his victim's throat and at the same instant found himself caught in the grip of a pair of powerful, naked arms.

AS THEY twisted and writhed on the ground, Blaze caught a glimpse of the profile of his antagonist's face and saw that he was either an Indian or a half-breed who for convenience wore nothing save a pair of buckskin breeches. His oily skin slipped from Blaze's grip time and time again, and in spite of every atom of Blaze's strength and skill, the other wriggled out of his grasp and with a single movement was on his feet. Then he simply vanished into the darkness.

Blaze swore and slowly picked himself up, nursing his bruised knuckles. Ruefully he made his way back to the camp, where he awakened Red.

"The devil's to pay, Red," he growled. "One of El Lobo's gang was here an' I jumped him, but he got away. That means the whole

pack'll be in on us at the crack o' day—or earlier."

"Why didn't you plug him?" Red was incredulous.

"Tried to take him alive an' find out where El Lobo hung out. Besides, others of the gang might have been near and would have heard a shot."

Red shrugged. "Well, the fat's in the fire. We'd better wake up ol' Hiccups an' keep our eyes skinned till daylight. I've got a hunch they won't bust in on us without a little skirmishin'. El Lobo don't take chances."

At the touch of Red's finger old Higgins was awake and in possession of his every faculty. A few words apprised him of the situation, and under his direction they took cover some fifty paces from the camp under a ledge which could not be attacked from the rear. There was little conversation, and at last they decided to let one man remain on guard and the others sleep.

It was near day when Blaze was awakened for his turn, and for an hour he sat motionless, listening, but no sound broke the stillness of the desert. As the roseate hues of dawn flared in the east, Higgins and Red joined him, and, after a tour of investigation about the place, they were convinced that there was no immediate danger, although none of them doubted but that El Lobo and his gang would be about their ears before many hours had passed.

"I reckon, boys," declared Higgins as they boiled coffee and fried flapjacks, "that we'd best make a break fer Wickenburg an' get our claims filed fust o' all. Then we'll have the law on our side, anyhow."

"But," objected Red, "what's to keep El Lobo from jumpin' these claims while we're gone?"

"Nothin'; only I reckon we can fetch in a few o' the boys who'll be kinda willin' to help us get rid o' the Lobo."

"He's right, Red," volunteered Blaze. "It's our best bet right now."

"All right." Red took a mouthful of flapjack. "I'll stick aroun' here an' watch while you go file the claims. Leastwise we'll know that way what El Lobo is up to. I'll keep in the clear—don't worry."

No amount of persuasion could change Red's decision, and in spite of the fact that Red had a positive genius for taking excellent care of himself against any and all odds or dangers, Blaze was worried. Twenty-to-one odds were too great for any man.

"Better ride with us, Red," he urged as they saddled to depart. "You'll be jumped before the day's over, an' we can't get back before midnight."

"Git a-goin'!" ordered Red. "Three men can't ride two hosses an' a jackass—if the Lobo hits your trail. I'm goin' to hole up, an' I'll be waitin' when you git back. Vamose!"

OLD HIGGINS seemed to know every foot of the country, and without any hesitation he led the way into the monotonous mesa. For an hour they gave their entire attention to picking their way over the jagged and difficult trail, and then they dropped off the mesa into a valley the floor of which was sanded and smooth. In the near distance stood two sentinel rocks, stark and unexpected, shooting for a hundred feet into the air with sheer walls.

"The Painted Rocks," said Hig-

gins, jerking his thumb toward them. "Got Indian signs on 'em."

When within something like a hundred yards of the rocks, Blaze suddenly drew rein. A movement, perhaps a shadow, at the base of the nearer column had caught his attention, and his hand dropped to the butt of the rifle in its boot.

"Careful!" he warned in a half whisper. "Somethin' behind there —on the left side."

From the rubble and scattered boulders about the base of the rock blazed three guns, and Blaze slipped from his saddle with his rifle in his hands. As he plunged into a slight depression in the sand, his horse staggered aimlessly past him and then fell, forming a welcome bulwark between him and those rocks. Cautiously he glanced about to see how Higgins had fared, and he drew a sharp breath when he saw the old prospector lying motionless in the sand some twenty feet off and his horse running back along the trail several hundred yards away.

III.

WITH a smothered oath Blaze crawled to his dead horse and peered cautiously over it. As far as he could see, the rocks were deserted, but he knew that to expose himself in the slightest would end the fight then and there.

He crouched low and began digging the sand from beneath the neck of the dead horse until he had scooped out a sizable hole. By burrowing into the sand he found that he could see the rocks through this hole, and he settled himself to wait until one of the attackers showed himself.

The sun was unbearably hot, but Blaze got some consolation in the fact that it was just as hot for the hidden marksmen since the sun was in such a position that there was no shade unexposed to his view. He trained his rifle on a boulder at the side of which grew a clump of sage and stared intently at this cover.

He believed that one of the attackers was peering through the sage, and after some five minutes he became convinced of that fact when he saw the sage move slightly although there was no breath of a breeze.

With infinite care he brought his brier-pointed bead to bear on that sage clump some four inches from the ground and pulled the trigger. The effect was instantaneous and gratifying. A brown object heaved convulsively, followed by a threshing behind the boulder, and then all was still. Blaze grunted with the realization that he was facing one less gun.

He tried to recall the exact points from which the two other guns had been fired, but in vain. In the excitement of the moment there had not been time to photograph the details with his eye. So far not a shot had been fired by the ambushers since that first fusillade, but the bandits had not left their positions; of that Blaze was assured. He wanted to crawl over to see if Higgins was still living, but the very grotesqueness of his position told its tale. Higgins was beyond help.

A slight sound behind him caused Blaze to twist about, and he froze into immobility when he found himself staring into the barrel of one of the largest-calibered rifles he had ever seen. The orifice yawned as he stared until it seemed to him that it would have been entirely possible to have thrust his fist into it. Behind that gun loomed the powerful figure of a man, gayly dressed in caballero fashion, spick-and-span

even in the drab and sultry desert.

Blaze subconsciously raised his hands, and the slitted mouth of the vaquero split in a grin through which flashed a row of perfect and unusually white teeth.

"Señor Vickers surrenders, *verdad?*" The bandit spoke in a laughing tone, and his English was accented only slightly.

Blaze instinctively recognized the man as El Lobo, and his surprise was complete. He had expected a half-breed, unkempt, bestial, and instead the bandit was largely pure Castilian, with perhaps a bit of Indian blood, which did not show save for the darkness of his skin which, at that, might have been due largely to sunburn. But about the man's eyes and mouth were lines that betrayed cruelty and relentlessness, the two attributes that had made of him the killer that he was.

Blaze, not to be outdone in nonchalance and civility, rolled and lighted a cigarette before speaking.

"El Lobo," he said in Spanish, "will perhaps tell me why I am attacked on the trail."

"It was your misfortune," replied El Lobo in Spanish also, "to escort the discoverer of the Lost Soldier Mine. Is the explanation sufficient?"

Blaze nodded and turned toward Higgins. He strode to the prostrate body, and a single glance apprised him of the fact that Higgins had never known what had hit him. A heavy-calibered ball had struck him just above the eye. Blaze stooped and spread a bandanna over his face.

Then he went back to El Lobo. "Well, let's get it over with," he rasped.

"There is no need of haste." El Lobo shrugged depreciatingly. "We will ride to the spring. Your marksmanship has given you a horse."

His unfeeling reference to his slain follower gave to Blaze a hint of the savage cruelty in the man and held out no hope for leniency.

ONE of El Lobo's men took Blaze's rifle and pistol, and then they marched over to the rocks where the horses had been hobbled. Through the blazing heat they rode back over the mesa, and within an hour they were close to the camp. Blaze urged his mount ahead, closing the distance between him and El Lobo, hoping that in some way he might be able to give Red a warning if it was not too late.

But when they came within sight of the spring, Blaze's hopes vanished. Three more of El Lobo's men were seated in the shade of the mesquite tree, and there was no sign of Red anywhere. Either they had found and shot him, or he had managed to evade them and had escaped across the mesa to the north. Regardless of what had happened, Red was out of the picture definitely. Blaze swung from his horse and relaxed watchfully in the shade.

El Lobo and a swarthy, evil-appearing Indian, who seemingly had been in charge of the party that had taken over the camp and spring, withdrew to a point several paces away and carried on a low-voiced conversation. Blaze strained his ears trying to catch some word which might tell him about Red, but the effort was futile. Once or twice they raised their voices, but they must have been using an Indian dialect unfamiliar to Blaze, for he could not distinguish a single word.

He let his glance rove over the camp, studying each of the bandits in turn. Judging by their trap-

pings, two of them were full-blooded Hopi Indians, while the others seemed to be half-breeds of the lowest order, having none of the virtues of either race. One of them was ransacking Higgins' supplies and making ready to cook a meal. Everything was done in leisurely fashion, as if the bandits had no intention of leaving the spring for some time to come.

Blaze measured the distance to a boulder near the spring against which one of the breeds had leaned his captured rifle, but with a shrug he realized that some six guns would be upon him by the time he could reach it. If any hope lay in that direction he would have to maneuver in some way so that he would be close enough to that boulder to take them by surprise. There was too much alertness among the men, but during the siesta hours a little later there might be a chance. With this idea in view, Blaze relaxed and stretched himself upon the ground.

El Lobo came over and sat down beside him. He blew smoke from his thin nostrils as he regarded Blaze with an expression of amused contempt.

"The Lost Soldier Gold Mine, where is it?" he murmured in sonorous Spanish.

Blaze stared at the killer in surprise and unbelief. For an instant he was tempted to tell him that he was sitting on it. Plainly El Lobo was not a prospector and did not recognize color even when it appeared on the surface. Any one with half an eye could see that the sand about the spring was rotten with it, to say nothing of that quartz vein some thirty feet away.

"I have always thought that the Lost Soldier Mine was imaginary," Blaze replied at length. "One sees strange things—mirages in the desert. Is it not so?"

El Lobo's smile faded, and lights glinted in his saffron eyes. In his expression there was something more remindful of the rattlesnake than of the wolf, a deadliness that was insatiable.

"Where is the gold?" repeated El Lobo evenly.

"Go to hell!" rasped Blaze in English. "You understand that, I hope."

"*Mira!* You are a fool. There are many ways of making you talk. Perhaps we can arrange some method. Adios!"

El Lobo walked away and called one of his men to him. An instant later this man nodded, mounted his cayuse, and rode north.

BLAZE arose and walked over to the spring for a drink of water. It was more in the nature of a test of his captors' vigilance than to quench a thirst because his rifle was leaning not more than six feet from the spring. As he stooped for a can of water, he was seized with the impulse to make that leap and have it out then and there, and in that instant a noose settled over his head and shoulders and was drawn tight. The can clattered to the ground at his feet, and with a supreme effort he resisted the urge to struggle against the bonds.

"Señor Vickers," came the smooth tones of El Lobo, "does not play the game of poker, I perceive. Your eyes betray you."

Within the next two minutes Blaze was bound hand and foot and tethered to the trunk of the big mesquite. He was able to lean against the bole of the tree, but even so the position was exceedingly uncomfortable and grew more so with the passing of each minute.

The five bandits ate a leisurely meal, and then El Lobo came over and made a cursory examination of Blaze's bonds. Apparently satisfied, he selected a deeply shaded spot and threw himself at length where he rolled and smoked several cigarettes. The others slept noisily and in various attitudes of repose.

Blaze's brain was busy with every possible plan of extricating himself from his hopeless position, but each plan he discarded upon the instant. He thought of trying to squirm down upon the ground and rub the rawhide thongs that bound his wrists against sharp jagged stones, but any such action would be noticed immediately by the watchful El Lobo. He had a jackknife in his pocket, but try as he might he was unable to get his fingers inside that pocket.

With the hope that when nightfall came the dew would soften the rawhide sufficiently to enable him to get at the knife, he sought to relax as far as possible and conserve his strength for the final ordeal, whatever it might be.

IV.

IT MUST have been somewhere near four o'clock, judging by the position of the sun, when the man whom El Lobo had sent away returned, bringing with him an old Hopi Indian whose outlandish garb and innumerable necklaces and amulets pronounced him a medicine man.

He was leading another horse to which were strapped four wicker baskets, each with a capacity of something like a bushel. These baskets were gingerly and carefully lifted to the ground and deposited back near the quartz outcrop some distance away.

Blaze wondered vaguely what those baskets contained that brought to those half-breeds, who feared neither man nor devil, such a feeling of apparent awe and respect. And to this mystery was soon added another that to Blaze was inexplicable. The old Hopi medicine man called two of the Indians to him and talked to them for a moment in guttural monosyllables. They vanished into the mesquite thickets and returned shortly with an armful each of two-foot stakes about an inch in diameter. The old medicine man busied himself sharpening these stakes with a hatchet and driving them into the ground something like three inches apart.

At the end of an hour he had constructed a miniature palisade of these sticks, but for what purpose Blaze could only guess. The stakes stood about eighteen inches high and inclosed a space of less than ten feet square. The entire arrangement was beneath the overhanging branches of the mesquite tree, only a few paces from Blaze, but throughout the performance nothing was said or done to give him an inkling of the purpose.

When the stakes were all driven home, the two Indians brought in several bundles of long withes, and these they began to weave between the stakes, forming a tight little wall eighteen inches high and so closely interwoven that the interstices were barely visible. At last the old Indian grunted in satisfaction and nodded toward the mysterious baskets.

When the tops were removed from the baskets and the contents dumped into the inclosure, one glance at the writhing, twisting mass sent a cold chill through Blaze's veins. A score of rattle-

snakes hissed and sang as they vainly sought to escape from the ten-foot pen. Fascinated, Blaze could only stare, but it was not until much later that he was able to appreciate to the fullest extent the significance of this diabolical arrangement.

Under the medicine man's direction, two crosspieces of wood were placed on the ground some six feet apart, and on them were laid a dozen poles of equal length, each pole fastened to the crosspiece with rawhide thongs. When completed, it was a rectangular platform, four by six feet, and to each corner of this litter was attached a rawhide rope some fifteen or twenty feet long. These four ropes were tied together at the other ends, but even up to this point Blaze had not understood the meaning that lay behind these mysterious activities.

El Lobo with a sinister smile strode over and stood beside Blaze, staring down at him speculatively.

"I am giving you this one chance to point out the location of the gold," he announced succinctly. "Will you talk?"

Blaze choked back the retort that sprang to his lips and shrugged.

El Lobo laughed shortly, mirthlessly. "You will talk," he promised grimly, "when night comes. Perhaps you fail to comprehend the things that Mad Ingato," he nodded toward the old medicine man, "has been doing. Within the hour you will be bound to that litter and suspended over the little rattlesnake corral. When the dew dampens, the rawhide ropes will stretch so that you will be slowly but surely lowered within reach of the fangs of those snakes. A pleasant thought, is it not?"

Blaze sought to mask the feeling of horror that gripped him in a clammy clutch. In spite of the almost-unbearable heat, the chill of ice crept the length of his spinal column. Of all the diabolical, inhuman, ghoulish forms of torture he had ever heard, this was the most fearful and ingenious. It betrayed more than anything else the bestial cruelty that El Lobo had inherited from his Apache ancestors.

Not daring to trust himself to speech, Blaze clenched his teeth, but his glance wandered involuntarily toward that pen of deadly snakes. Two of them were unusually large, and they lay coiled close to the wall of stakes. Their confinement in those wicker baskets had apparently angered them until they would, of course, strike at anything that came within reach. Blaze shuddered and shot a quick speculative glance at the sun.

"The time draws close," said El Lobo with another low laugh through the wisps of smoke from his cigarette, "and I am anxiously awaiting the actions of the man who is said to be the bravest of the brave. It will undoubtedly prove very interesting."

Blaze flared in an uncontrollable burst of anger. "You damned yellow-bellied sidewinder!" he rasped in English. "If you've got the guts of a horned toad, you'll turn me loose an' give me a break—with guns or naked hands. I'll break your damned neck with these fingers——"

"Why should I loose your bonds?" purred El Lobo with a shrug. "I offered you the chance of talking, and you refused. You cannot complain."

BLAZE lapsed into sullen silence and unseeingly gazed at the low rim of hills in the west, behind which the ball of sun was dropping with

a swiftness that brought a tightening to his every muscle. To him it seemed only a minute or so until the sun was gone and the blue shadows came creeping in across the valley with sinister aspect.

One of the bandits started a fire, but it was noticeably quite a little distance from the pen of rattlers. They were careful not to hinder the action of the dew on the rawhide when the time came for that ordeal.

Blaze, with a coldness that gripped his heart, felt his shirt cling clammily to his back, and he realized that in that season the dew would be unusually heavy. This El Lobo knew, too. Probably it was not the first time that he had rigged out that torture rack for some hapless captive.

A raging thirst was consuming Blaze, but he did not ask for water, and they offered him none. A little later the nondescript gang gathered about the fire and ate, paying scant, if any, attention to Blaze.

It was rapidly growing dark, and to Blaze the approach of darkness seemed to crush out his last hope. Vaguely he thought about Red and wondered where they had left his body. At first he had clung to the hope that Red had escaped, but on second thought he realized that such a feat was impossible, alone and afoot, with those Indian trackers who could follow a trail that would be lost to a bloodhound.

By lowering his body a little, Blaze let one of his hands touch the grass beside him, and it was filming with dew. He tried to force his rawhide thongs to give a little by exerting every atom of his energy, but the heat of the day appeared to have seared and hardened those thongs into things of steel. With only a little leeway with them he would be able to get at his pocketknife, but the man who had knotted those bonds knew his business.

Blaze shot a furtive glance at the snake corral and saw that the deadly reptiles were motionless, the majority of them coiled and ready to strike at the slightest provocation. With a longing he had never known before, Blaze looked at his old rifle, leaning against the boulder beside the spring. Just one chance, with that rifle in his hands, was to him the most desirable thing he had ever wanted, and he almost groaned in his impotence.

El Lobo came over from the fire and examined the ropes that had been attached to the pole litter. His fingers gently stroked his pointed mustache as he straightened and barked a few words of command to his followers. Blaze subconsciously stiffened.

A broad-shouldered breed lounged over to the snake corral and unwound a plaited reata. One end of this he fastened to the knotted end of the four rawhide ropes, and the other end with a single deft motion he flicked across a substantial limb of the mesquite over the pen of rattlers. The reata end dropped beyond the little corral, and two of the other bandits caught it up and stood waiting.

They dragged Blaze to the litter and threw him upon it, securing him there, and in another instant the two men at the far end of the reata began tugging with all their strength. Blaze felt himself being lifted, and then came a gentle, swaying motion as the apparatus was adjusted and made secure.

Slowly twisting his head, Blaze gazed over the side of the litter and drew in his breath sharply when he saw that his face was within two feet of a watchful rattler whose coils

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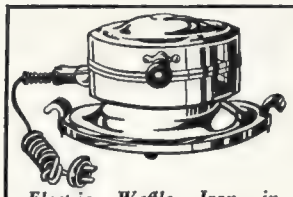

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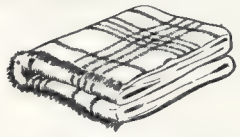

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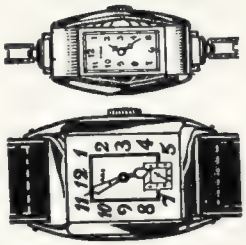

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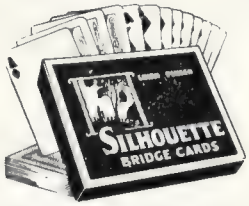

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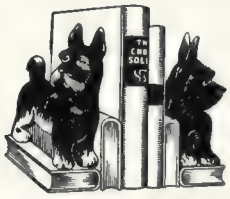

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were slowly tightening. Quickly he rolled as close to the opposite edge of the litter as he dared, and then froze into immobility, expecting each instant to feel the sharp sting of those poisoned fangs.

The night deepened, and the stars came out far away, pitiless and cold. Blaze felt the dampness of the dew gather on his brow—or was it cold sweat? He tried to determine whether the rawhide was stretching, but he dared not turn toward the ground again. His thoughts milled, grew inconsistent, and he wondered if he was losing his mind. It was only with the exertion of every possible mental effort that he managed to give at least the appearance of self-control, although the blood pounded in his temples and his senses reeled.

The bandit gang was determined to miss nothing of the show, and they lighted a ring of bonfires around the mesquite, but at some little distance away, so far that Blaze could feel nothing of the warmth of the flames, but the light was strong enough that he could distinctly see each leaf pattern in the low canopy over his head. But when the first flush of the fires died down the shadows crowded in, making even close objects indistinct and grotesque.

One of the men started to replenish the blazes, but a sharp word of command from El Lobo caused him to halt. The killer was taking no chances of driving the dew away from the rawhide. And Blaze, crouching as nearly in the middle of the pole litter as possible, became certain that he was slowly and inexorably being lowered into the reach of those waiting fangs.

He knew that the thongs about his wrists had grown looser and did not pain any longer, and once more he twisted slightly and tried to work his hand into his pocket, but his effort was futile. He desisted at last, for fear that his struggles would cause the rawhide ropes to stretch faster.

His blood froze in his veins when he realized that the spaces between the poles in the litter were at least three inches wide, and that the snakes could—and would—strike him through his clothing just as quickly as he was lowered within reach of them. Panic-stricken terror gripped him, and he forced his lips apart to call El Lobo and offer to show him the location of the mine, but in that instant a movement in the leaves just over his head silenced him.

V.

IN UTTER fascination Blaze saw a long pole being thrust by imperceptible degrees straight toward him. He watched it in utter fascination, and he gasped when he saw that to its end was attached a hunting knife, its blade open.

He started to shout, but he resisted the impulse with the thought that a knife was preferable to the death that awaited him. And when that knife blade began sawing at the thongs that bound his wrists the reaction was so strong that he grew limp and helpless for an instant.

Suddenly he understood. Good old Red! He had used that mesquite as a lookout and had remained hidden and motionless in the foliage far overhead throughout the heat and interminable hours. Hope surged within Blaze, and the blood coursed through his veins like liquor, steeling him for the livid play that was coming.

He twisted sideways a bit so that Red could get the blade at the thongs, and even the nick of its edge

against his skin brought a tingle of thrill to him. Anxiously he cast a glance about him, and he could have shouted when he saw that the pole and knife had not been noticed in the deepening shadows.

The last strand dropped from his wrists, and he flexed his hands and fingers fiercely to regain circulation. They hurt like the devil, but he gritted his teeth to prevent any outcry and guided the knife to his ankles and helped Red sever those bonds. He knew that Red was just over his head and would be ready to leap the instant Blaze made his break.

For ten seconds he lay waiting for the pricking pains in his hands to decrease, and at the same time he twisted his ankles and feet until he knew that they would answer his demands.

So slowly as not to attract any attention he drew himself to a crouching posture and paused long enough to relocate that boulder against which his rifle was leaning.

"Now!" he shouted, and leaped far out from his precarious perch.

He cleared the edge of that little corral by a good yard and, stooping low, he zigzagged toward the boulder. He heard Red hit the ground with a shrill yell and his old .45 began to roar. Other guns answered him, and a bullet sang off the boulder in front of Blaze as he grabbed up his rifle. Then he went into action, leaping for the cover of the boulder, and throwing a stream of lead at the crouching bandits just beyond the fire.

El Lobo came out from the shadows on his right, shooting as he came, and plainly making a break for the horses. Blaze arose in front of him and with deliberate aim that could not miss pressed the trigger. El Lobo fired at the same instant, but his hurried aim missed and then he slowly crumpled and slid in a shapeless heap to the ground.

The firing ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and to Blaze's ears came the pounding of running horses, two or three of them. The fight was over, and out of the shadows loomed Red.

"Hurt, Blaze?" he demanded anxiously.

"Not a scratch." Blaze laughed uncertainly, realizing that the terrific strain of the last half hour had made a deep inroad upon his nerves.

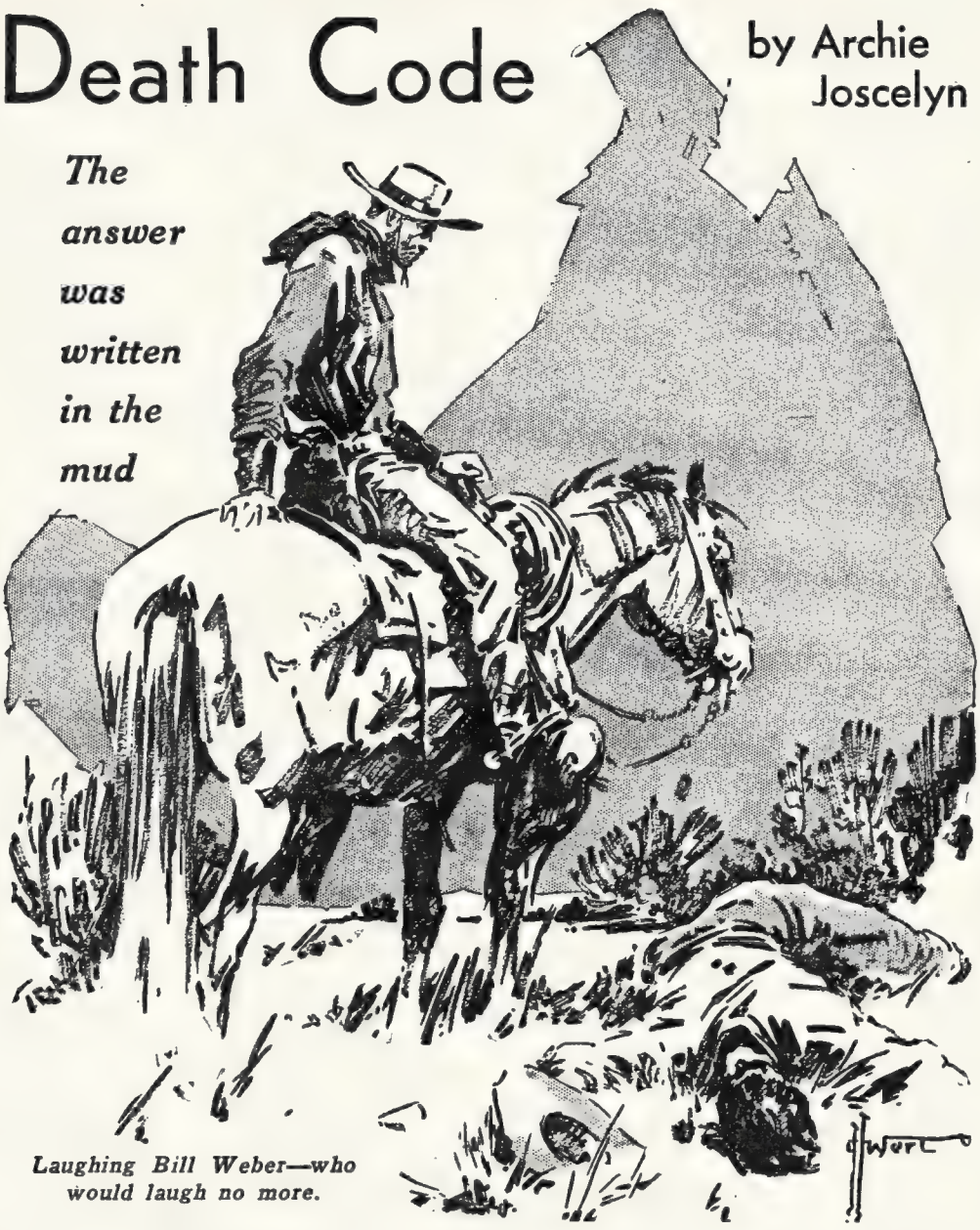
"El Lobo get away?" Red stooped low and struck a match, flaring it in the killer's face. "Plum betwixt the eyes!" he murmured in soft exultation. "An', boy, I know just how you felt puttin' it there. You had that comin' to you. That was the most hellish thing any human mind ever conceived."

Blaze shuddered. "Come on, Red!" he gritted. "Hold a light while I put a bullet through the head of ever' damn one of them snakes."

Death Code

by Archie Joscelyn

The answer was written in the mud



Laughing Bill Weber—who would laugh no more.

THE WHISTLE on "Limpin' " Dave Tuttle's lips died suddenly as a coyote skulked around a corner of the shack and out of sight in the grove of cottonwoods beyond. Dave's feet loosened a little in the stirrups, his whole lounging attitude stiffened to alertness.

An eager whinny from the corrals directed his attention there. Within the smaller corral a sorrel horse had caught sight of him and was attempting to poke his head between the bars, again neighing eagerly, almost frantically.

As Limpin' rode toward him, it needed only a glance to understand

his plight. In the larger adjoining corral, just beyond its reach, was a trough of water, piped down from a spring on the hill behind the house.

Dave opened the intervening gate, nodded soberly. His hunch had been correct. The horse was drinking with desperate thirst. Something was wrong on the Two Bars. Bill Weber wouldn't go off and leave a horse penned away from water, unless he expected to be back soon. But he'd been away, evidently, a long time.

The big cow-puncher looked carefully around, then moved to the house, limping a little. Inside, it was warmer than the outer air, with sunshine through a south window making a pattern on the floor, a fly buzzing in the stillness. An alarm clock on a shelf had stopped. Otherwise, everything seemed to be in place, with Bill's careful neatness manifest, undisturbed——

Not everything. Bill prided himself, justly, as a cook. Now a pan of bread dough, set to rise, had pushed up, spilled over the edge of the table, and run down onto a chair. The dough itself was shrunken again, hard, and dry of crust.

Ten minutes later, Limpin' was in the saddle again, riding, eyes alert for sign. A mile from the house he caught the animated squawk of feasting magpies, who rose in a black-and-white-winged cloud as he rode up. Coyotes had preceded them, and a big steer was partly devoured. But it was easy enough to see the manner of its death: A bullet hole pierced the skull neatly.

"And that was a Two Bars critter," Limpin' muttered.

In the next half hour he found six more, all killed in the same manner. His lips were set in a tight line now as he rode, eyes scanning the horizon, grimly expectant. But save for the occasional feasting magpies or a startled jack rabbit, nothing stirred anywhere.

Leaving the coulee country and richer grasslands behind, there was only flat, silver-gray sagebrush stretching ahead, little more than knee-high, waving in the wind. His horse's hoofs sounded solidly on the lightly frozen ground; the tingling wind moaned from the north. The sun had vanished behind a growing haze of cloud.

His horse, legs swishing through the brittle sage, shied suddenly, jumping in a way that would have unseated a less-accustomed rider. Limpin' jerked him around, sat staring down at the thing which had frightened him, his own face becoming as cheerless as the wintry day.

Bill Weber lay there, "Laughing Bill" Weber, who would laugh no more; almost hidden in the sheltering sage, sprawled face downward in tortured death. One arm was outstretched before him, the tip of the index finger daubed with dried, frozen mud, the fingers of the other hand contorted, clawlike, around a clump of sagebrush, half pulled from the soil by the last straining effort of a desperate, dying man.

But the significant thing was the two red stains on the clothing of his back, stains, these, of bullets fired from behind. Above him, the endless sea of sage rippled in the stinging wind, hiding what lay there so that neither coyotes nor scavenger birds had discovered it.

For a moment Limpin' Dave Tuttle sat staring down, unmoving. His gray eyes darkened soberly as he read the tale of treachery and slowly he reached up and removed his hat. Then he dismounted, his limp a little more pronounced, as always in moments of stress. De-

spite the half stiff knee from a horse's smashing kick, he dropped on his knees beside the murdered body of his friend.

For it was apparent to him now that Laughin' Bill Weber had not died instantly. Under the chill of the wind, the threat of winter sweeping down across two thousand miles of the North, the sea of mud which had spread here a few days before, following a soaking rain, was now frozen to a stark grayness, like that of the rippling sage above. And in that mud, even then about to stiffen with cold, Bill Weber, fighting death, had written with mud-crusted finger a message concerning his slayers.

IT LOOKED a meaningless jumble, nothing more. And so, of course, the dying man had intended it to look. Close at hand, sharply outlined in that same frozen mud, was the imprint of a heel, a smaller boot than Bill Weber wore, and made, accordingly, by his slayer, stooping for a look at his victim. It had been necessary that to him this message in the mud should mean nothing, otherwise a stamp of his boot would have blotted it away.

Limpin' studied it for long minutes, frowning. There was no single word or letter formed, only meaningless finger marks. Yet those marks must have meaning. Slowly, he fumbled in a pocket, drew out his knife, arose, and on the back of his saddle scratched, with painstaking care, what Bill Weber's finger had written in the mud.

"I ain't got much of what you'd call book learnin', Bill, old partner," he said earnestly. "I can sign my name and read a little, takin' it easy, but I wa'n't eddicated like you was. Just the same, I'll make out to read what you wrote, Bill, and then I'll ride the trail of your killer to a finish. It's a promise, Bill."

A grave prepared among the sage, Limpin' rode on, lost in thought. It was significant that, among the slain cattle, he had found only steers, with the Two Bars brand plain to see. Bill Weber had settled in here four years before, filing on a hundred and sixty for good water and headquarters, then, with plenty of vacant government land around him, had set out to build a spread of his own. Doing it honestly, handicapped by lack of money, had been a slow job, but he was getting a start—sufficiently so, it seemed now, that he'd made some bitter enemies.

He had owned forty head of cows, but they had simply vanished. It wouldn't be a difficult matter to hide them away for the winter, and there would be calves in the spring. Which seemed clear enough proof that one of the neighboring outfits was responsible. But which one? There was the Hole-in-a-Door, the Rafter 6, the Muleshoe, and the 99. None of them were very close, but any one of them could have been guilty, and some one of them probably had been.

By a careful search, Limpin' might be able to discover the cows and find a clue there. Though, probably pocketed away in some remote corner of the range, it could be readily argued that they had strayed there of their own accord, or been shunted in by a different outfit. Still, he'd keep a close mouth and do a little looking.

No one in this country, it was likely, even suspected that Limpin' had bought a half interest in the Two Bars a week before. The contract still reposed in his pocket, and "Pop" Arthway and his wife, who had signed as witnesses, were as

chary of words as a miser is of money. Besides which, they had already left to spend the winter in the south.

So he might as well keep still about his half interest, until spring at least. The law, meanwhile, wouldn't bother to inquire as to whether Bill Weber was dead or merely absent somewhere, which would be his own business if he merely wanted to disappear for a while. So there'd be no hunt for heirs until then. And the only man who had any clear proof that Bill was dead, besides himself, would be the killer; who could be depended on to keep still.

A winter on the Rafter 6 brought nothing to light in the shape of the missing cows; neither did the spring round-up, in which all four big outfits joined; but that meant nothing one way or the other. Neither had Limpin' deciphered the code which Bill Weber had left behind, and which his slayer had taken merely for the death travail of his victim.

But it was time now, with the grass green again, to find things out somehow, to call for a show-down. Since he intended to take possession of the deserted Two Bars and throw a herd in there, his own safety depended on it. Otherwise, when the killer learned that he had been Bill's partner, he could expect the same sort of treatment.

Limpin' Dave rode for Hangtown, and his automatic was well-oiled. For a long time, religiously, when off by himself, he had practiced shooting each day and in all sorts of difficulties. Especially had he polished up on a quick draw and accurate aim, for he had no notion of what sort of man he might be pitted against. But a killer, who shot from behind, was apt to be bad medicine.

Bill Weber had lived long enough to recognize his slayer, but that hadn't saved him. One advantage lay with Limpin' now. The killing had occurred the previous fall, when the grass was sear and brown. Now it flushed the prairies with green, and in the uplands wild flowers dotted the hills, the magpies squawked about huge nests of sticks, and even a grave in the sage sprouted with new grass. By now the gunman would have been lulled to a sense of security.

At Hangtown, Limpin' Dave did a strange thing for a cow-puncher—he sought out the little library which an eccentric citizen had bestowed upon the town a few years before, and which was Hangtown's greatest boast to culture. However wild and lawless the town might be on occasion, here was proof that it was civilized.

But the books, painfully pored over, gave no answer to the question. Limpin' came forth after hours of study, looked wistfully toward the swinging doors of the Black Wolf, but shook his head. He had no time for even a single drink until he had solved the riddle.

A train whistled in the distance, a line of black smoke plumed its faltering way toward Hangtown. With sudden inspiration, Limpin' hurried toward the box-car station. For a brief period in his varied career, Laughin' Bill Weber had been a telegrapher. A confab with the station agent confirmed Limpin's guess. Those marks in the mud were dots and dashes—the Morse code. And they formed two letters—T B.

LIMPIN' pondered. From his own knowledge those letters would be the initials of one of two men, but they might belong to either. Both were potential, if not actual,

killers. Limpin' suspected them of being men with notched guns. But he had to get the right one.

First, there was "Trigger" Bevins —a typical, black-frocked gambler, his reputation as unsavory as boarding-house hash. Bevins, it was also rumored, owned a share in the Muleshoe Ranch. If the fates should send him up against Trigger Bevins, Limpin' knew that, for all his gun practice, the odds would still be against him.

Tom Belund of the Hole-in-a-Door was the other man. In every way but one he was the direct opposite of Trigger Bevins. In evil they were the same. Tom Belund was big, placid, with a slow-smiling face, ponderous-seeming as a freight car, yet, when it came to gun play, deadly as a striking rattlesnake. For all his bulk, he had a small foot and might have worn the boot of the killer. Of the two men, it was a toss-up as to which was the worse to face.

Moreover, the two men were enemies—bitter foes from a feud of long back. And that, as more than one man had covertly remarked, was the only good thing about either of them. For there was plenty of outlawry and plain deviltry abroad in the Muleshoe country, and it was suspected that one of them often directed from behind the scenes. If these two king-pins of the trigger fraternity should join hands, then it would be a stark and evil day for the land.

"It's bound to be one of the two," Limpin' Dave muttered into the teeth of a rising wind, edging out of the box-car station beside the twin lines of steel, which, seemingly drawing to a point as they ran, reflected back the soft glimmer of a rising moon.

After the dullness of day, Hangtown was stirring to activity. Cow ponies with drooping heads lined the hitching rails; lights glowed yellow from unshaded windows; a burst of song swelled and died with the opening and closing of a door.

Limpin's long, slim fingers touched the butt of his own gun tentatively. There wasn't so much comfort in the solid feel of it as there had been, now that he knew pretty well what those marks in the mud stood for—the two most deadly gunmen who had ever stalked the naked streets of Hangtown, and it was up to him to try conclusions with one of them.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed. It was dark in the street now, save for the pools of light splashing from the windows, and the lines of horses were deep shadows without form. A swinging door opened, and a man passed through. There could be no mistaking that great, slow-moving bulk—Tom Belund. A moment later Limpin' likewise stepped through into the Black Wolf Saloon.

A few heads turned inquiringly at his entrance, and Tom Belund, bulking mountainous beside the bar, glanced briefly at him and away again, his eyes dull coals in a white mountain of flesh. The little glass from which he slowly sipped straight whisky seemed a toy thing in his hand.

Limpin' lounged near him, sipping thoughtfully at his own glass, yet not conscious of the taste of the liquor. He was wondering how he could open the subject in a way that would bring him his answer, yet not overplay his hand if Tom Belund was not the man he wanted; for, in that case, he had no desire to tip off his quest to Trigger Bevins before they should meet. While he pondered, a side door opened, and a man came out, into the main room.

The door was open only a second. Yet Limpin's straying glance showed him a single occupant remaining in the room, seated at a table, his long, sensitive fingers slowly ruffling a pack of cards, his eyes detached and thoughtful—Trigger Bevins.

Limpin' was not the only man to see him. He knew that when Tom Belund asked the bartender if there was an empty room that he could have, and the barman, with a jerk of his head, indicated that room. Belund, like a flowing mountain, moved to it, his bulk hiding all sight beyond as he stood in the open door. No one else had been standing in a position to see that it was not empty.

This was the chance Limpin' sought—to face these two men together. Not stopping to think further, Limpin' followed. The bartender, seeing his intention, opened his mouth, but, before he could protest, Limpin' was through, inside the room with the two men—one of whom he knew was a killer.

A SINGLE coal-oil lamp hung suspended from the ceiling, above the table. A few red-and-blue chips were scattered on the tablecloth, spotted here and there with spilled liquor.

Trigger Bevins had stiffened a little under this double intrusion, but otherwise he sat unmoving, eyes watchful under heavy brows, fingers loosely toying with the cards. A silver-mounted gun sagged loosely in the holster at his hip, carefully moved out so that the edge of the table would not interfere with a ready draw.

Tom Belund turned, looking at Limpin', as he closed the door softly. The eyes of the big man were like those of a dead fish now, glazed, unblinking.

The cards in Trigger Bevins' hands slapped softly on the table. "This," he said, "is a private room, gentlemen."

The silence carried on after his voice, almost as if it had not been broken. Limpin' Dave Tuttle felt a wave like an electric current pervading the room. The rising wind without rattled at the window. Above the door on a shelf a fleshless skull sat grinning, a grim death's-head, and Limpin's nerves prickled at sight of it. A mirthless smile creased his tight-set mouth. It was an apt sign. This was the showdown, and he'd learn the truth before he left the room.

Moreover, he possessed an ace in the hole now which would not be his otherwise, if he met either of them face to face. One of them had murdered Bill Weber. But they hated each other.

"Well?" asked Trigger Bevins again. "What is it?"

Limpin' was aware now that both men were looking at him, waiting for him to speak. He stood with his back against the wall, arms hanging loosely.

"I've got a few things that I wanted to say to you," he said slowly. "Both of you. Seemed like this was too good a chance to miss. Maybe you both know that Bill Weber was my friend."

There was sudden added tension in the room. Limpin' could feel it, like a moving current of cold air, though neither man betrayed outward interest by so much as the flicker of an eyelid.

"Yes?" Bevins drawled the word, smothering a yawn. "What of it?"

"He was murdered, last fall. I found his body. He'd been shot in the back—twice."

"So that's what happened to him, eh?" Trigger's voice was casual.

"I'd kind of wondered where he disappeared to, all of a sudden."

"That's what happened to him," said Limpin'. He was watching both men now, alertly, his lithe body sagging a little—the gunman's crouch. If either noticed, they gave no sign.

"Before Bill died," Limpin' went on, "he managed to write a little message in the mud, with his finger, tellin' who it was that killed him. He wrote it in code—he'd once been a telegrapher on the railroad. Took me some little time to find out what it meant."

For a moment, following the announcement, there was stark silence. That tingling air was more vivid now, so that Limpin' could almost smell it, like a breath of brimstone. He waited. He knew that the killer, whichever he was, understood.

Then Tom Belund, his face like carved ivory, heavy, yet soft-footed as a gliding cat, moved to the door, softly turned the key in the lock, drew it out, and slipped it into his pocket.

The window, Limpin' saw now, was closed with a heavy wooden shutter which barred out alike the moonlight and the rising wind. And the door was thick, built to withstand, at need, bullets or axes.

"It looks as if we made a mistake that time, Trigger," said Tom Belund softly.

"Yes," agreed Trigger Bevins, with equal softness. "But we won't make another, Tom."

For an instant Limpin' Dave's bones seemed jellied. For the first time he knew, and the truth was grim as that leering skull above the doorway. He'd been a fool, not to have understood the barman's sign. Those two bullet holes in the back weren't just a double gesture, where one would have been plenty. They were from two guns together. Likewise, Bill's code had carried a double meaning.

There was a double reason why lawlessness flourished in the country, for these men were the leaders, and their public show of mutual hatred had been but a pretense to fool such blind idiots as he had been. They had killed Bill Weber, shooting together, bullet for bullet—as they intended now, since he knew the truth, to kill him.

Limpin' was shut in this room with the two of them, trapped with the two most deadly gunmen in Hangtown. Against either of them he would have faced unequal odds. Against the two of them, what chance did he have? None, in their minds, or they would not so deliberately have admitted the truth. They had given Bill Weber no chance, and neither did they intend to give him any.

For one paralyzing moment, fear gripped him. It was the devastating realization of the truth which stunned. Then, as his mind cleared, courage flowed back. They were cool, unhurried, about this business. And therein lay his only chance.

One shoulder hunched up, his other arm dropped down with all the speed that he had been able to acquire in long months of patient practice. Limpin's gun muzzle jerked with whirling lead. Two bullets ripped into the wall, a fraction of a second later, at the spot where he had been standing, and heavy darkness dropped in the room like a falling curtain of death. His own shot had smashed the lamp; his leap had carried him to safety. Luck had been with him there.

Luck! He would have need of it now, trapped in a black hole with two ruthless killers intent upon his life. Outside, in the main room of

the Black Wolf, those shots would have been heard, jarring all activity to a strained silence. But no one out there would be hasty about trying to get in here to investigate, and that heavy door would stop them if they did.

The silence was like a smothering hand. It was broken by a sharp, quick sentence from Trigger Bevins:

"Get him under our heels, Tom."

NOTHING more was said. Limpin' crouched against the wall, his gun ready, ears strained, repressing his breathing. The others were doing the same, waiting. To shoot, in that blackness, would be the signal for lead to come slamming back at the streak of gunfire. Yet that was what must inevitably happen. Gunfire, until either he or they died. And before they could be killed, he must shoot. It was their life, or his. This was the show-down.

He fired at a sound, leaping to one side as his gun belched stabbing flame, like a knife lancing in the blackness. Almost instantly, from two other corners of the room, lead crashed back at him. Following the roar of the guns, close upon the sound of them, were two smaller thuds.

Limpin', crouching there, with powder smoke acrid in his nostrils, was at a loss to understand them—strange noises. His own bullet had not found a mark; he was sure of that. Neither had the others. Those sounds were not the thuds of falling bodies. Somehow, those noises affected him, might mean life or death.

He moved, cautiously, but his foot came in contact with a chip which had fallen on the floor, sent it slithering across the bare boards. Another gun thundered in the closeness, a tapping sound hard upon its heels; then a second gun. His own gun answered the streaking flames, yet that faint thud or tap came to his ears.

Again there was heavy, throbbing silence. So far, no casualties. While he listened, Limpin' Dave wrestled with that other problem—the key to his own continued existence, if he could find it. Those tapping sounds—they had followed, in each instance, just a fraction after the other guns had spoken.

More than that—the two gunmen who sought his life did not fire at the flash of his own gun, not until an instant later. Why the delay? What had Trigger Bevins said?

"Get him under our heels, Tom!"

That was it. It was a code sentence, even as Bill Weber had written in code. Both were codes of death. Heels. Now he had it! They didn't care to risk stopping each other's lead. When they fired or moved, they instantly tapped the floor with a heel, and that tap was the signal of a friend. If the tap did not follow swiftly, then they fired to try to kill—him.

Limpin' smiled grimly. Three could play at that game. But he must do more than play their game. He must turn it against them, if he ever hoped to see daylight again, or run cows on the Two Bars where Bill had died. Behind him, a questing hand encountered the door. He reached up to that shelf above it, where that thing which once had been a man sat in the darkness.

He had to make them think that he was somewhere else. This should serve for that.

His other hand clasped his gun, his finger squeezed the trigger. Instantly, with his heel, he tapped sharply, once.

Limpin' did more than that. With

his left hand, he tossed the skull toward the far side of the room, heard it strike heavily. And then, upon the silence, guns blasted again—vicious, ugly guns, killers' weapons, firing twice each, followed then by thuds, the sounds of heavy bodies falling, then a strenuous breathing which gave place to silence. There was a pounding on the other side of the door now.

FOR A MOMENT, Limpin' waited. Then he moved, cautiously. There was no sound now, no belching flame from murderers' guns, even when he stumbled against an overturned chair. The door burst open, light streamed in. On opposite sides of the room, each sprawled dead upon the floor, the grinning skull between them, lay the two most-feared gunmen who had ever stalked the streets of Hangtown.

"Yep," agreed Limpin' soberly. "They got each other. Always did hate each other like rattlers, of course."

No one, even the barman, could openly deny this now. And Limpin' Dave said nothing of the code of death which had been turned against them. Both had heard his signal, and the falling death's-head had sounded, so that each had been certain that the other was across the room, where Limpin' really stood. With the sound of the skull, neither had waited for signals. Each had fired twice with desperate speed, once at the spot where the skull hit, once at each other's guns, and had found targets. Laughin' Bill Weber was avenged.

by Allan R. Bosworth

"It's true! They's a bunch of hombres down there without no pants on!"

The Men Prefer Pants

"SOAPY" STEVENS, foreman of the Rafter O, staggered down the windmill ladder like a man made dizzy by extreme altitude. He jammed a pair of field glasses into their worn leather case, slung the case over his saddle horn without waking the pinto, and turned toward the bow-legged waddy on the tank dam.

"It's true!" said Soapy in a strained voice. "It's jest like Tascosa claimed. They's a bunch of hombres down at the lower ranch without no pants on!"

Bud Reagan whirled, his shirt half off his back. His eyes bulged as he looked out through the collar, and his jaw sagged in amazement.

"You mean—you mean——"

"Yep! Jest like Tascosa said. Cavortin' around naked. What's

more, they're headin' for the ranch house, so I reckon you better keep your shirt on. Let's go!"

Bud cast a longing glance at the tank. In miles and miles of dusty, sun-baked range, this was the only spot of liquid coolness that was more than knee-deep to a dogie calf.

"By hokey!" Bud spoke with feeling. "It ain't right, Soapy! They's a thousand steers in this here pasture, with nothin' between 'em and them naked fellers but four strands o' bob wire. Now, a steer ain't ever seen a man in the nude, and——"

"Come on!" Soapy interrupted. "They're goin' to the house, I told you. Mebbe we'll see what it's all about."

The foreman swung into his saddle, rousing the pinto from dreams of green Elysian fields. Bud Reagan growled something under his breath and forked a sorrel mustang. Together, they streaked through the mesquites at a gallop.

It was two miles to the Rafter O's upper ranch house, and a mile farther to what had been known as the "lower ranch" down the draw. Bill Owens owned them both, but had always leased the lower ranch to other stockmen. Once, Soapy remembered with a grimace, Bill had leased it to a sheepman. Now, with Bill back in the East, he seemed to have done even worse.

Soapy recalled the wire that the owner had sent him:

LEASING LOWER RANCH TO DUDE OUTFIT STOP TREAT THEM NICE BILL OWENS

"I'll treat 'em nice!" growled the foreman, as he turned the pinto into the feed corral and climbed down to peel off the saddle. "I'll find out what the heck happened to their clothes."

He turned toward the house, Bud following. A long, stringy puncher with no hat and very little hair came from the front porch, running awkwardly in his high-heeled boots.

"Hey!" gasped "Tascosa" Jones, out of breath and making excited gestures. "Hey! Seven of them naked fellers are comin' up the draw. You know—them hombres I was tellin' you about this mornin', from the dude outfit. They're carryin' bumbershoots, and a bunch o' steers is follerin' 'em, plumb curious."

Soapy nodded grimly.

He stamped to the porch and leaned against a post to roll a cigarette. Out of the mesquites came a strange procession—seven men who were nude except for loin cloths and shoes, each carrying an umbrella. Soapy surveyed them with a snort of disgust. Strange physiques for the cow country—either pot-bellied and flabby, or skinny as a hatrack horse, spavined and old.

The steers appeared behind them, following at a discreet distance. Not a longhorn in the herd had ever seen an umbrella before.

THE GATE latch clicked. A tall, skinny man with knees that stood out like apples in a pair of Christmas stockings came up the walk. He regarded the Rafter O trio through tortoise-shell glasses, coldly, impersonally. Then he spoke:

"Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Soapy Stevens?"

Soapy looked up, startled. The man's voice was not like the rest of him. It was deep, vibrant; the voice of a fanatic, a supersalesman.

"Mr. Soapy Stevens?"

Bud Reagan nudged the foreman in his ribs.

Soapy came out of his trance. "That's me!" he muttered. "I'm him."

The tall man extended a bony arm. Soapy found himself shaking hands. The eyes behind the spectacles were strong and compelling.

"Dr. Hotchkiss," said the vibrant voice. "Merriwether Hotchkiss, head of the Sunshine Ranch Nudist Colony. We just arrived last night and——"

"Noodist colony!" gasped Soapy. "Why, I thought somebody stole your clothes! Bill Owens wired me that he had leased the lower ranch to a *dude* outfit——"

"Misunderstanding." The doctor smiled. "Quite simple. I had a cold when I closed the deal. Although I told Mr. Owens I planned to start a 'nude' ranch, the cold made it sound like a 'dude' ranch. By the way, have you ever thought of becoming a nudist, Mr. Stevens?"

Soapy's gaping jaw clicked shut. "I'll keep my pants!" he flared. "What did you want over here, doc?"

"Why, we were just walking for the exercise, and I wanted to invite you and your men to join our colony. Sunshine—ah, it's a great body builder! Er—who are your cowboys?"

"This here's Bud Reagan. This bald-headed hombre is Tascosa Jones. And—hey, come out here, Panhandle!"

There was a grumbled complaint from inside the ranch house. The screen door opened amid a shuffle of boots, and a stomach emerged. It was followed by a grunting, red-faced puncher of middle age, so stout that he had to wear suspenders.

"This here's Panhandle Pierce. Panhandle, meet Doc Hotchkiss!"

"Panhandle's" eyes widened. "Strip poker, doc?"

"I'm a nudist," Hotchkiss replied stiffly. "How are you, Mr. Pierce?"

"Turrible," Panhandle grunted. "I got rheumatism somethin' fierce."

"Ah!" Hotchkiss leaned forward, fanaticism blazing in his eyes. "Ah! Rheumatism—you suffer from it when you have this life-giving sun! All you have to do, my friend, is renounce those clothes, get back to nature——"

Panhandle was listening, open-mouthed.

Tascosa Jones thrust his bald head forward belligerently. "If the sun is so dang wonderful, what's the bumbershoots for?" he demanded.

"One must get accustomed by degrees to the rays," the doctor replied, smiling. "In a week, we shall have discarded the umbrellas. Tomorrow we discard our shoes, and we lock all clothing up to prevent it from being a temptation. You must come over, Mr. Pierce, and join our colony. I invite all of you. Within a month, I'll wager you have all come to my way of thinking and will have discarded clothing! Good day, gentlemen!"

The doctor hoisted his umbrella again. His patients fell in with him at the gate. Soapy Stevens thought a couple of them looked somewhat longingly at the cowboys' clothes as they turned back down the dusty trail.

The Rafter O waddies looked at each other in silence for a minute, then Bud Reagan exploded:

"Why, the dawg-gone pantless shorthorn! I claim it's an insult, bein' invited to join one o' them naked outfits! He thinks he can make us throw away our pants——"

"I sabe that hombre!" Soapy declared. "He's one of the reformer kind that thinks everybody has got to do as he says. You can see it in his eyes. He's got all them patients of his buffaloed!"

"Yeh! I'll bet he charges 'em plenty!" Tascosa chuckled. "He not only took their pants—I reckon they lost their shirts when they signed up with him. They're shore funny-lookin'."

Panhandle Pierce sighed. "I wonder if the sun *can* cure rheumatism?" he inquired. "Now you take my case, fer instance. I ain't had an easy——"

"Hey!" shouted Bud Reagan. "Grab your hosses. There's hell poppin'!"

SOAPY whirled to look at the flat. A whirlwind, twisting its way through the mesquites, had come upon the nudists with seeming malice aforethought.

It caught up dust from the cow trail and flung it into the faces of the plodding men. Then the swirling gust turned half a dozen umbrellas inside out and jerked them from their owners' hands, hurling them back into the growing herd of curious longhorns.

Soapy was running for the corral before the first thunder of hoofs rolled up from the flat. Panhandle Pierce joined the other waddies in a dash for their horses, puffing and grunting with pain and exertion.

The Rafter O foreman slammed the bit in the pinto's mouth and threw saddle and blanket on together. The whirlwind was traversing the upper flat, now, its column of dust thinning as it neared the hills. But the damage was done. Several hundred wild-eyed longhorns were on the run.

"Head 'em!" shouted Soapy. "Turn 'em before they pile up against the fence. Make 'em mill!"

He raced out of the corral with the other riders hot after him. They swept down into the chaparral with the mad noises of a good-sized stampede in their ears, ducking low under mesquite limbs that threatened to rake them from their saddles, crashing through cat's-claw that tore at their chaps.

The thunder grew. Hoofs rattled, horns clacked. Frightened bellows and frantic snorts punctuated the din. Contagious terror ran through the herd like an electric wave. Steers ran blindly, crowded by their neighbors, pushed by those behind.

Crash!

A blaze-faced longhorn jammed one front leg into a prairie-dog hole and went down with a sickening snap of the bone. A hundred of his fellows trampled the life from his body, and the spot became a high ripple in the surging sea of dusty red bodies and tossing horns.

Soapy struck at a tangent across the flat, plying quirt and spur until the pinto could feel the hot breath of the leaders on his flanks. The rider jerked his yellow slicker from his saddle and began waving it in the faces of the steers. Bud and Panhandle were close behind; Tascosa circled farther in front.

Baang! Baang! Baang!

The bald-headed puncher fired into the air, into the ground, across the faces of the steers. The longhorns were beginning to tire after two miles of rib-bursting effort.

"Yip-eee! We got 'em turnin'! Quiet 'em down!"

Tascosa holstered his gun. Soapy put away his slicker. The punchers began calling to the cattle in long, soothing tones. The steers in the van doubled back, and the herd began to mill a few hundred yards from the barbed-wire fence.

"Hold 'em till they settle down!" Soapy yelled. "I'll see what become o' them naked hombres."

He rode back toward the trail

that connected the two ranch houses, with visions of trampled bodies ground into the dust. The spot where he had last seen the nudists looked as though it had been swept by a raging flood. Mesquite and cat's-claw were flattened.

"Hotchkiss!" yelled Soapy. "Hotchkiss!"

"Help! Help!"

The frantic appeal came from the willows and live oaks of the draw. Other voices chimed in with lung-strained effort. Soapy grinned and turned the pinto toward the trees.

"Where are you?"

"Up here! Is it safe to come down, now?"

Soapy looked up in the gloom of the live oaks. There were the nudists, all together, clinging to a sloping, vine-covered tree trunk. Hotchkiss, still the undisputed leader, was farthest from the ground, while one fat man might easily have been raked from his perch if the steers had come that way.

For a minute, Soapy stared. Then he burst into loud, rude laughter, doubling over his saddle horn and slapping his chaps.

"Ha, ha, ha! You look like a bunch o' plucked buzzards settin' on a roost! Ha, ha, ha! You shore must've flew into that tree! Ha, ha!"

"This is no laughing matter!" raged Hotchkiss. "Climb down, Hemingway, so the rest of us can descend. I repeat, there is nothing funny about this, Stevens. I shall report your negligence to Mr. Owens. Those steers should not be allowed to roam loose in a pasture like——"

"Ha, ha! Go ahead, doc! He'll bust hisself laffin'. Say, this here's a tough country to run naked in; you hombres are goin' to find that out pronto! Look what happened to the Indians—they tried to go naked! Well, I'll see you later. Ha, ha! Adios!"

SOAPY STEVENS rode to Tarantula next day and consulted the lawyer who handled Bill Owens' affairs. The lawyer shook his head. It seemed the lease had been signed, and it called for a nude ranch.

"Perhaps Bill didn't read it, or thought it was an error and would be corrected," said the attorney. "At any rate, the lease is legal and binding. There's only one way to get it broken—let Hotchkiss himself break it."

The lawyer smiled at Soapy, and the foreman grinned back. "I sabe!" he said. "By the time Bill Owens comes home, he won't be bothered with no nudists."

Soapy went back out on the street. He almost bumped into a burly, black-mustached waddy coming out of the old Prairie Dog Saloon.

"Well, well! If it ain't Soapy Stevens! How much do you want for your pants, Soapy? And I'd like to buy your boots, too. Over on th' 7B, we heard you don't wear clothes no more. Ha ha!"

"Outa my way!" Soapy ranted.

This was Jack Edmonds, foreman of the 7B spread on the north of the Rafter O. There had been real trouble between the two outfits at one time, and bad blood remained.

"Waal, me an' the boys will be over to get your pants," Edmonds mocked. "With times as hard as they're gettin' to be, we ain't too proud to wear secondhand clothes."

"You can go straight to hell!" flared Soapy. "Don't show your face on the Rafter O, unless you want some lead slung into it."

He mounted the pinto and rode away, while a half dozen 7B wad-

dies in the door of the Prairie Dog guffawed. Soapy frowned. Another scrap with the 7B while Bill Owens was in the East wouldn't be so good——

Tascosa met him at the front gate of the ranch house. "Here's some literatoor Hotchkiss brought over," grumbled the bald-headed puncher. "It's all about how you shouldn't wear no clothes so the pores of your hide can breathe."

The tow-headed foreman dashed the pamphlets to the ground. "Still tryin' to convert us, eh?" he snarled. "So the pores of your hide can breathe, huh? Well, I'll bet the pores of them nudists was jest pantin' yesterday when they shinned up that tree. Was the whole shootin' match over again?"

"Yeah," Bud Reagan drawled. "And, by hokey, I'll bet they'll be cravin' clothes to-morrer! The sun was plenty hot, and their bumbershoots has been busted. They was barefooted to-day, too."

Tascosa craned his neck to look over the flat. "And say!" he exclaimed. "Panhandle rode down that way to look for that roan mustang you wanted brought up for bustin'. Well, he ain't come back. I'm afraid he's joined up with them nudists."

"He'd better not!" fumed Soapy. "I'll fire the first bird that has anything to do with that outfit."

"Well, you know how Panhandle is—him and his rheumatism. I think he's jest lazy, myself."

"Come on," Soapy ordered. "Let's eat supper. If he ain't back by the time we finish, we'd better ride down in the pasture and look for him. Hoss might have piled him."

PANHANDLE didn't come back. The three other Rafter O waddies saddled their horses and rode into the dusk. They were back at the ranch house two hours later, having found no sign of the fat puncher.

"Look!" exclaimed Bud. "By hokey, there's his hoss!"

The sorrel stood by the watering trough, still saddled, reins over his head. Soapy yelled Panhandle's name and got no answer. He set his jaw grimly.

"Somethin' shore must have happened to that hombre. We'll have to turn out in the mornin' and look for him. No use lookin' any more to-night—there won't be a moon till late. This hoss is plumb gentle. I cain't understand it."

"I can!" exclaimed Tascosa. "Here's a note."

He removed a folded paper from the saddle and struck a match. It was from Dr. Merriwether Hotchkiss.

"'Mr. Pierce's trousers are tied behind the saddle,'" Tascosa read. "'He became a member of our Sunshine Ranch Nudist Colony this afternoon and will soon be rid of his rheumatism.'"

"By hokey!" ejaculated Bud. "The poor old hunk o' fat! He'll melt in the sun."

"He must be weak in the upper story!" Soapy swore. "Well, that settles it. To-morrow we start war against them naked waddies, and I'll bet you in two weeks we have 'em cravin' overcoats."

Tascosa grunted. "Some of 'em ain't so sold on the idea, even now, if you ast me. They was limpin' up the trail to-day like a herd of sore-footed burros. Too much cactus and grass burs in this here country."

"They's goin' to be a lot more!" Soapy gritted. "I figgered we'd turn in and get a good night's sleep. Well, we ain't. Grab a feed sack or two and come with me. Turn Pan-

handle's hoss into the corral first."

The foreman led the way down toward the draw. So Panhandle had weakened and turned nudist, eh? He was like that—always trying patent medicines, trying anything. An easy mark for a smooth-tongued salesman, Panhandle was. And Dr. Hotchkiss impressed Soapy as being a slick article.

"Here's the spot!" Soapy announced, reining in the pinto. "Remember this, Bud? It's where that saucer-eyed sorrel piled you last fall and made you look like a pincushion. They's more grass burs per square inch here than you ever saw in a mile anywhere else. Pick 'em—fill the sacks with 'em. Throw in lots o' cactus, too."

Each man took a grain sack and turned to, cursing fervently at frequent intervals when the burs stuck their fingers. They worked for hours, then rode silently toward the lower ranch. It was nearly dawn when they returned to the Rafter O headquarters and crawled wearily into their bunks.

THE SUN was up, bright and hot, when they arose. Bud Reagan pulled on his boots and stepped to the door while Tascosa kindled a fire in the kitchen stove and put on a pot of coffee.

"By hokey, this is a swell day for nudists!" the bow-legged puncher exclaimed. "Hurry up—let's ride up to the north windmill with the glasses. I'm dyin' fer a look at them hombres."

Soapy and the two punchers rode to the windmill on the divide immediately after breakfast, hastily climbed the tower, and lay flat on the platform while Soapy adjusted the binoculars and took a long look at the rambling old adobe structure that Hotchkiss had renamed "Sunshine Ranch." For a few minutes, all was quiet. The nudists were having breakfast.

"There they come!" Soapy said at last. "Out for their mornin' walk, I reckon. All in a bunch. Wait a minute—there's Panhandle, the big slob!"

"Gimme them glasses!" begged Bud. "By hokey, he's there, all right! Ain't even got his boots on! Ouch! They've found the grass burs!"

Tascosa Jones snatched the binoculars for a look. The nudists were walking out toward the barn. Every step, and they found the stickers that the Rafter O punchers had scattered over the yard the night before. Tascosa beat the windmill platform with mirth.

"Here, I want another look!" Soapy declared. "What're they doin' now?"

Tascosa wiped tears from his eyes and handed over the glasses. "Goin' back into the house!" he roared. "Ha, ha! Goin' back for their shoes. But jest wait a minute—you ain't seen nothin' yet! Wait till they open that gate!"

Soapy peered through the binoculars. Yes; the nudists were going back inside. They were not only picking grass burs from their feet; the whole outfit seemed possessed with a desire to scratch their sunburned bodies and legs.

The foreman smiled grimly. "Jest like I thought!" he drawled. "I reckon this nudist colony ain't goin' to last long. There they come again. They got their shoes. I reckon doc had to unlock the trunk and give 'em to everybody. Here, Bud, take a look!"

Bud squinted through the glasses and roared. "Yep; they got shoes! All doc's chillun got shoes, includin' Panhandle! He's put on his boots

now—— By hokey, Panhandle's runnin'! He's makin' a break for the gate! Mebbe he don't want to stay——"

"For the gate?" repeated Tascosa. "Lemme see! Wait till he opens that gate."

"What's at the gate?" demanded Soapy suspiciously.

Tascosa scratched his bald head and grinned. "I didn't tell you last night—I thought mebbe you would think it was goin' too strong. But I found a big hornets' nest down there in the mesquites, and I hung it on the gate so that when it opens, the——"

A yell from Bud interrupted. Soapy grabbed the glasses. The two other men did not need them to see a general scattering of nudists. They climbed the fence. They went under the fence in terrible haste. They dashed for the house and the barn, slamming doors behind them. Soapy came near falling off the windmill as he shouted with glee.

"Panhandle's takin' to the tules!" he yelled. "There he goes, and I reckon the hornets are ridin' herd on him! Ha, ha! That'll learn the ol' buzzard somethin'!"

Bud took advantage of Soapy's weakness from laughter and seized the glasses. But all was quiet on Sunshine Ranch. The three men climbed down the windmill ladder and went to their horses.

"After all, we got some work to do," Soapy reminded them. "I reckon Panhandle will be showin' up after a while, but he won't be in no shape to punch cows. Say, it's goin' to be hot enough to blister the belly of a sand lizard! Let's come back after a while for that swim we was goin' to take day before yesterday."

They rode toward the ranch house, then scattered into the pasture to look after flyblown steers and attend to other routine tasks. The sun climbed overhead, and the air hung heavy and still. Cattle bedded down in the humid shade of the draw bottom. Jack rabbits crouched panting in the shelter of cat's-claw clumps and the coarse *sacaguista*. The mesquites hung listlessly, and only the locusts welcomed the heat with their drowsy incantations.

"Yes, sir; this here is fine weather for nudists!" Bud insisted as mid-afternoon found them heading for the coolness of the big dirt tank. "Watch me shed my clothes! Last one in's a rotten egg!"

He left his clothes in a neat pile under the motionless windmill. The two other waddies were after him in a few seconds, noisily splashing in the water. Wasps and yellow jackets took flight on noisy wings. The saddle horses stamped in the scanty shade of the near-by mesquites, switching their tails at the flies.

The Rafter O punchers had been in the water half an hour when Tascosa raised his shining head.

"Listen!" he exclaimed. "What's botherin' the hosses?"

Silence fell over the tank. Soapy recognized a snort from the pinto. He struck out for the bank with lusty strokes, while the other cowboys stood on the muddy bottom and waited.

"Aw, jest a hossfly, I reckon," Bud Reagan said. "Come on back, Soapy! You shore will sunburn if you stay out more'n a minute!"

But the foreman found foothold in the tangle of Bermuda grass that carpeted the tank dam. He took one look at the horses and beyond them, then whirled with a shout:

"Come out o' there! Them dang

7B waddies are playin' a trick on us—they're stealin' our clothes!"

THE OTHER punchers made the bank in record time. They scrambled out to see a vague rustling of the brush a hundred yards away.

Bud Reagan ran to the base of the windmill, stepped on a grass bur, and howled as the nudists had done.

"Hey!" he shouted. "They left our guns! I savvy their scurvy trick—they left their hosses in the chaparral and sneaked up on foot! By hokey, I'd kill a man for this—and I will!"

Soapy Stevens raced painfully to his side and seized his own .45. The foreman's boots were still there, and he pulled them on and buckled the gun around his bare waist, drawing it two notches tighter than he usually wore it.

"They asked for it—leavin' our guns!" he exclaimed. "Come on; fork your hosses and give it to 'em!"

The cow ponies snorted and shied as the strange riders mounted. Soapy yelled as he hit the hot saddle. Then he stood in his stirrups and dashed into the mesquites.

No chaps, now, to ward off the brush. Cat's-claw scratched at their legs as they headed into the chaparral. The sun blazed down on bare backs. Fifty yards into the brush, and they were forced to slow down. If the 7B men had reached their own horses, they would never be overtaken.

An overhanging branch left a red scratch across Tascosa's bald head, and he roared with pain and anger.

"Wait till I get some pants!" he ranted. "Jest wait! I'll ride over to the 7B and teach 'em how to play jokes! I'll shoot up the works for——"

Bang! Baang!

Bud Reagan's gun crashed into the brush. He was shooting blindly. Soapy Stevens jerked his own .45 into play.

Baang! Baa-aang!

"There they go!" shouted Bud. "By hokey, they ain't got to their hosses yet! Come on—get 'em!"

Soapy glimpsed a man running through the brush. He lifted the gun again and cut off a mesquite branch within six inches of the fleeing figure.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot! We'll give up!"

Soapy lowered his gun. From the opposite direction came a crash as a horseman burst through the chaparral, riding toward them.

"Don't shoot! We didn't mean any harm!"

"Wait a minute!" yelled Bud. "Say, it ain't the 7B gang at all! It's—by hokey, it's them dang noodists!"

The Rafter O men crowded into an open space. There was the fat man Hotchkiss had addressed as Hemingway, his sides heaving with the exertion of a hot run. He had on Tascosa's shirt and trousers and was unable to button either. He let Bud Reagan's boots fall to the ground and stood with hands upraised.

Out of the mesquites came two other men, clad in the stolen clothing. Beyond them appeared Panhandle Pierce, his face red and swollen, his eyes burning with wrath as he climbed down from his saddle.

"Shoot the skunks!" he bellowed. "Shoot 'em down!"

"We didn't mean any harm," pleaded Hemingway. "We were just desperate! Hotchkiss locked up our clothes again—even the shoes. We are sick and tired of all this."

Soapy tried hard to keep a stern face, while anger and mirth battled

within his bare breast and the sun blistered his back. He climbed down from the pinto.

"Gimme my pants!" he told a skinny nudist. "What's the idea, anyhow?"

Hemingway stepped forward, peeling off the stolen clothing and handing it to Tascosa. "We saw you as you went in the tank," he explained. "We have a contract with Hotchkiss, and he won't let us break it. We've got a—well, a rash of some sort. This doesn't seem to be the proper sort of country for a nudist colony. There are too many stickers. And red ants. And this morning there were hornets——"

"We wanted the clothes only long enough to get to town," the skinny man apologized.

Bud Reagan looked at the third nudist, who was disrobing. "By hokey!" he exclaimed. "Poison ivy!"

Soapy nodded. "I knew it. It was on that tree they shinned up the other day. That's why I said the outfit wouldn't last long. Say, Panhandle, what's the idea? Once you become converted to goin' naked, you ought to stay that way —it might cure your rheumatism."

Panhandle snorted. "I wasn't converted!" he growled. "I come acrost that roan mustang and roped him. Didn't have no hobbles, so I used my suspenders. Then he took a run with me holdin' onto the rope, and he drug me and peeled off my pants in the brush. It was over by the lower ranch, and that hombre Hotchkiss come out and grabbed my pants and allowed as how I was goin' to stay. Well, I knew you rannies would hooraw the life outa me, so I stayed overnight and then made a break for it, and the dang hornets——"

"We aren't going back!" flared Hemingway with surprising spirit. "We'll die first. Lend us some clothes to get to town."

A TALL MAN, fully clad, appeared in the brush. It was Dr. Merriwether Hotchkiss, but the old light had gone out of his eyes, and he looked beaten.

"That won't be necessary," he said with a hopeless gesture. "Come on back to Sunshine Ranch. I'll give you your clothes. I have decided to move the colony to a more favorable location. I shall have to forfeit the advance payment and break the lease, Stevens."

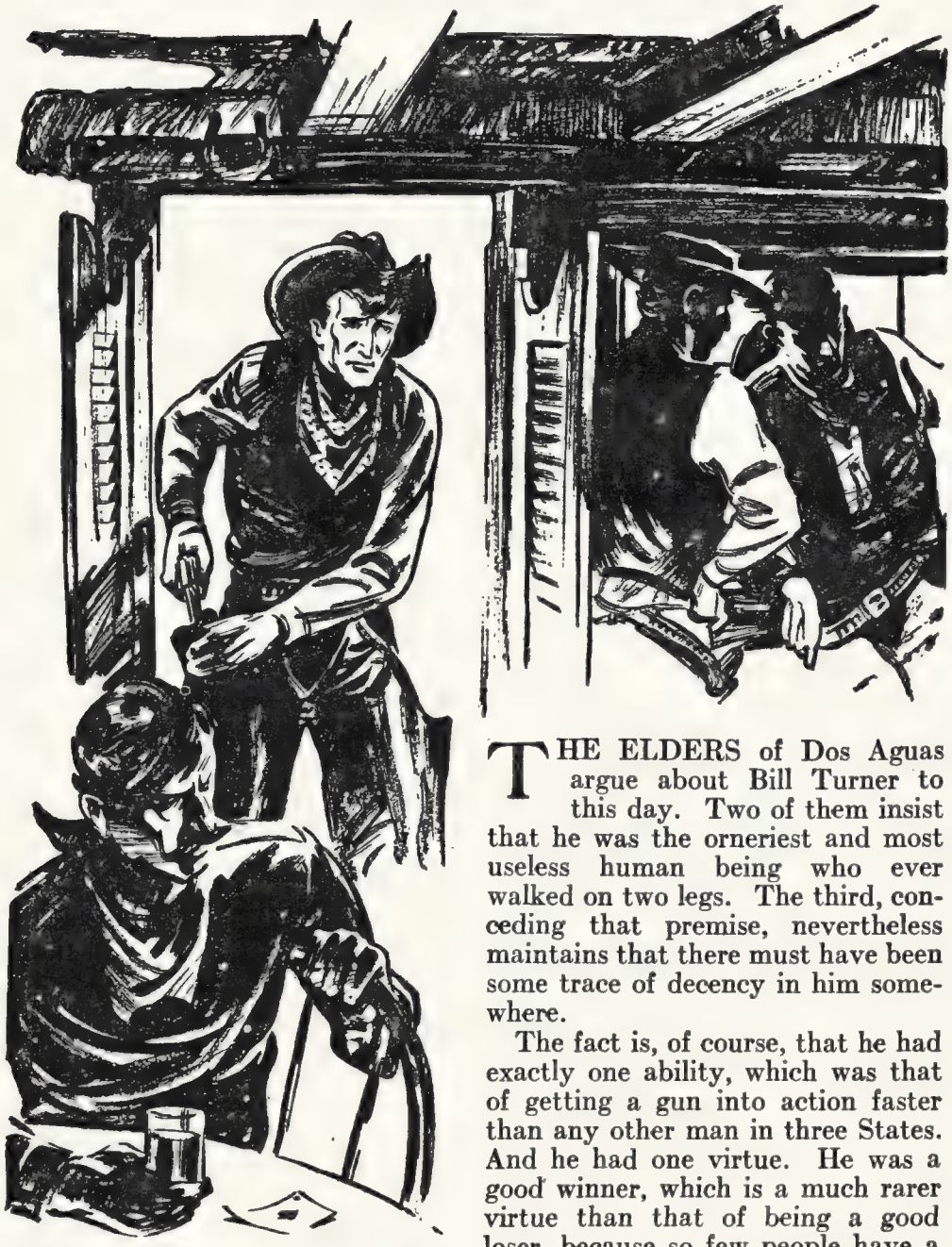
Soapy grinned.

"I saw the men sneaking over here and guessed they were foraging for clothes," Hotchkiss went on. "Well, what can I do? The place just isn't suitable. Fine sunshine—that's true. Wonderful air. But other things—very uncomfortable things!"

He stopped to scratch where the poison ivy had left its red mark on his legs. Soapy paused in the act of pulling on his jumper.

"That's the spirit, doc!" he exclaimed, slapping Hotchkiss heartily on his sunburned back. "You're a better loser than I figgered you would be. It's all right about the lease. Mebbe it was a great idea; but you got on the wrong range. Yep; I told you! The Indians went naked, and look what happened to them!"

ONE SOLITARY



He was proving that he even dared to stop and take a drink while Chip Harlow was getting out his gun.

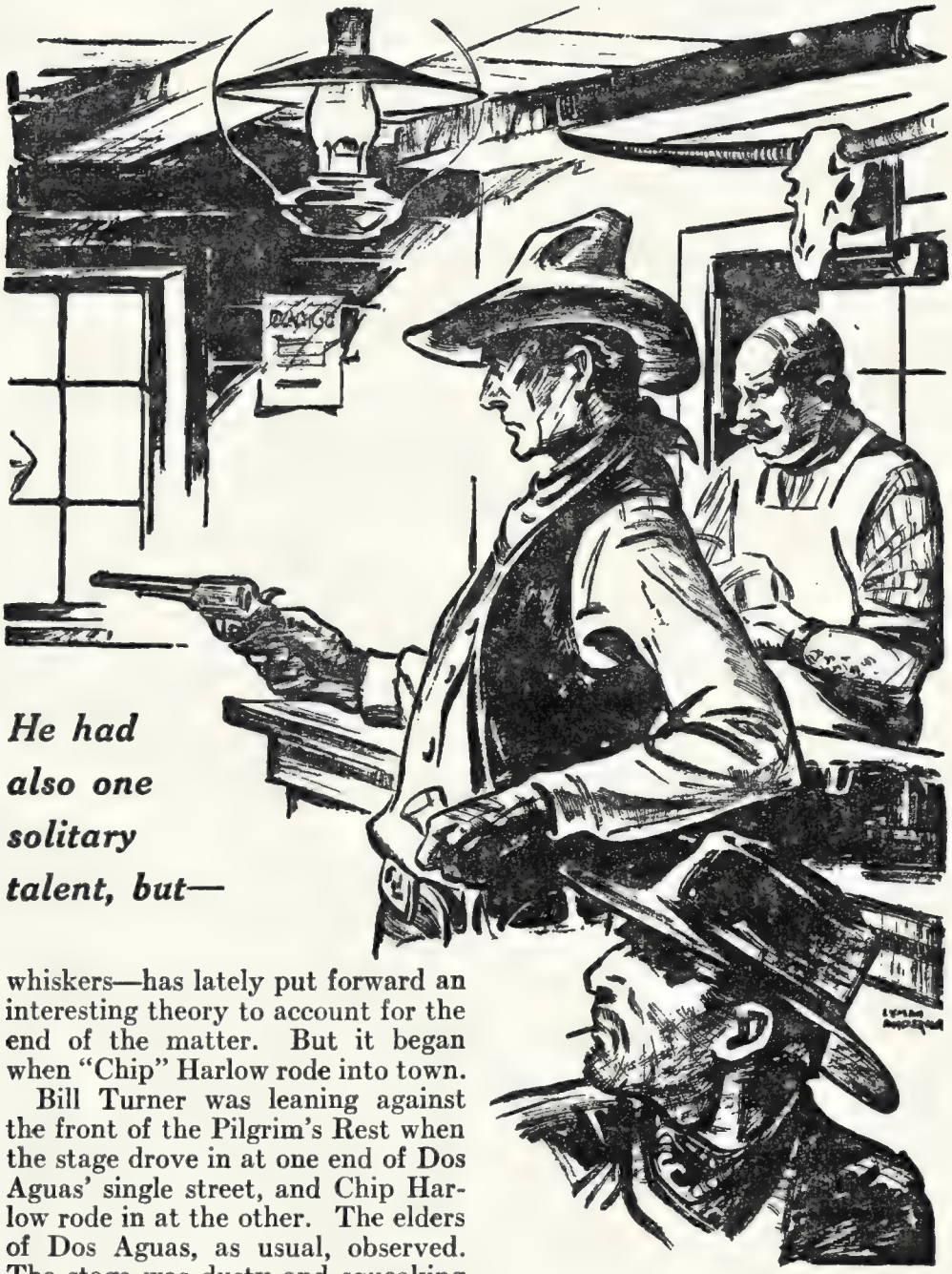
THE ELDERS of Dos Aguas argue about Bill Turner to this day. Two of them insist that he was the orneriest and most useless human being who ever walked on two legs. The third, conceding that premise, nevertheless maintains that there must have been some trace of decency in him somewhere.

The fact is, of course, that he had exactly one ability, which was that of getting a gun into action faster than any other man in three States. And he had one virtue. He was a good winner, which is a much rarer virtue than that of being a good loser, because so few people have a chance to practice it.

But the argument goes on. One of the elders—he of the grizzled

VIRTUE

by Murray Leinster



He had also one solitary talent, but—

whiskers—has lately put forward an interesting theory to account for the end of the matter. But it began when "Chip" Harlow rode into town.

Bill Turner was leaning against the front of the Pilgrim's Rest when the stage drove in at one end of Dos Aguas' single street, and Chip Harlow rode in at the other. The elders of Dos Aguas, as usual, observed. The stage was dusty and squeaking badly. The runty horses that pulled it were sweat-streaked and tired. It drew up with an unsteady flourish before the post office, and the stage driver, slightly drunk as usual, handed down the one thin bag.

Bill Turner watched in the morosely solitary grandeur of the town's unofficial despot. The postmaster took the bag into his store. Chip Harlow appeared clearly, dusty and travel-worn, but riding jauntily. The stage driver fumblingly handed down a couple of express packages. He gathered up his reins again.

Somebody shouted. The door of the stage had opened, and a figure was crawling out of it—a Mexican, grotesquely deformed. He moved slowly, fumblingly. It looked as if he would reach the ground just in time to be knocked down and mangled by the back wheels of the coach. The stage driver clucked to his horses. More yells. Chip Harlow, from ahead, saw what was happening. He held up his hand and shouted.

But Bill came suddenly to life. He roared: "Go on! Drive on, Sam! Get movin'!"

The twisted figure, crawling down the steps from the stage, still moved painfully, uncertainly. The slightly drunken stage driver cocked an inquiring eye at the men who shouted at him.

"Go ahead!" roared Bill. He made a gesture with his hand. "Go on!"

Again the driver clucked, the horses started, and Chip reined in before them. He reached over and caught the leaders' bits. He held the team, until the Mexican was safely on the ground. The driver blinked owlishly at him.

"What'sh matter?"

"Somebody gettin' out!" snapped Chip. "You damn near ran over him."

The driver braced himself carefully and leaned over, wavering. He looked. The Mexican was moving in a slow and painfully decrepit fashion to the safety of the plank sidewalk.

"Damn'f I didn't!" said the driver. "Shorry, fella!" He turned back, braced himself anew, and gathered up the reins again. "All right now?" he asked hopefully of Chip.

Chip drew aside. "Go ahead."

The stage rattled away, leaving a cloud of alkali dust behind it. On the sidewalk there was a little commotion. Bill had walked over to the Mexican he'd failed to have run over. His always-reddish eyes snapped.

"You, Juan!" he snarled. "I tol' you——"

The Mexican cringed. "Señor," he protested, "I don't know——"

"The hell you don't!" snarled Bill again. "I tol' you if you ever come sneakin' around wheah I was again I'd finish up the job o' killin' you!"

Chip had dismounted. He pushed his way through an uneasily silent crowd. "What's the rumpus?" he demanded.

The Mexican turned abjectedly upon him. "I don' know, señor. Thees caballero——"

Chip said grimly: "Leave 'im alone, fella. He's all crippled up. If you want to pick on somebody, pick on me!"

Bill Turner went deadly. He moved forward two paces, and men scattered promptly to be out of the line of bullets.

"I shot up that Mex once," he snarled, "for stealin' my hawss an' half chokin' him to death to tame him. An' I'll do as I damn well please with 'im! If you don't like it, get out your gun!"

Bill had but one ability, but the elders of Dos Aguas knew what that was. They knew it thoroughly. One of them looked apprehensively at Chip Harlow, and two looked pityingly at him.

But Chip said imperturbably: "I ain't packin' a gun, fella. I ain't got the habit. But I'll knock hell outa you if you touch this Mex, crippled up like he is!"

Chip made rather an impressive picture, just then. He was young and straight and not bad-looking, and Bill was decidedly less impressive and snarling to boot. Then, too, the Mexican made a pathetic spectacle. His body was bent, and his movements were grotesquely spiderlike and unnatural.

Of course it had to be at this moment that Katy Morewell had to come along the street to see it. Her father was in the crowd that had scattered when Bill moved toward Chip. He enlightened Katy on any points that might not have been clear. Bill's voice, raging, told the rest.

"You don't pack a gun, hey? Well, if you're goin' to run up against me, you damn well better pack a gun! I'm standin' no foolin', an' that Mex better keep outa my way!"

Chip saw Katy's eyes upon him. And she was a pretty girl. Chip was young. He threw a little bit of swagger into the way he carried himself. He turned to the Mex, and his voice carried.

"Where you goin', amigo?"

"The—the livery stable, señor," replied the Mex abjectedly. "Ol' an' broken as I am, I am steel a good man weeth horses. I have me a job there."

"Then I'll see you get there," returned Chip grandly, "without any more trouble. Got any stuff to carry?"

He slung the Mexican's flimsy bundle over his saddle and, leading his horse, walked along the sidewalk beside the unpleasantly grotesque figure.

It did make a pretty picture. It was flamboyant; it was youthful, and it was the sort of thing that would appeal to a pretty girl.

Chip didn't turn around to see if Katy was looking. He knew she was. And Chip had that fine sense of satisfaction which comes only to a young man when he knows he is doing something very noble and which is being duly appreciated by the observers.

The three elders of Dos Aguas noted not only his nobility, but his awareness of it.

But Bill Turner felt quite otherwise than noble. For one reason, he considered himself in love with Katy Morewell. And he saw her eyes flash scorn at him. The elders noted that, too.

II.

THEY told Chip what he'd done, next day. Bill Turner was, just then, the unofficial potentate, lord, ruler, and despot of Dos Aguas. He'd come into town a month before, got into two gun fights with the law on his side, and was the man on his feet at the end of both of them.

With seeming deliberateness, too, he'd picked out the two fastest men in Gila County to quarrel with, and he'd shaded them both so completely that his supremacy as a gun slinger needed no more demonstration.

Having acquired a reputation, he settled down in a congenial atmosphere to run Dos Aguas. And he did. He was a public nuisance and a public menace, and he had just one ability, which was not calculated to make him popular, and one virtue which nobody knew about. The elders of Dos Aguas explained this past history to Chip Harlow from their customary loafing place

where they could see all that went on.

Chip stood in the blazing sunshine, then, keeping a roving eye open for Katy Morewell, to whom he'd already been introduced by her father, at Katy's private request.

"You fellas ought to get rid of him," said Chip.

"If you want to pick a fight with him," broke in the elder with the gray mustache grimly, "an' get bumped while not packin' a gun, we can handle him. That's murder, an' we can get him hung for it. But you ain't likely to volunteer. Seems like nobody's in a hurry to commit suicide, either that way or gun fightin' with him."

Chip grinned. "I ain't," he admitted readily. "How does he make a livin'? Bein' the town's bad man oughta take up most of his time."

"Heaven knows what he lives on!" replied the elder with the elk's tooth pessimistically. "His own gall, prob'ly, with meanness for dessert. He ain't winnin' nothin' at poker. Folks dodge playin' with him because he plays a rotten game an' gets mad as hell when he loses. I don't know how he's livin'."

Katy Morewell showed up in the distance, and Chip brightened. He maneuvered to close the discussion and strode away. He fell into step beside Katy and strolled grandly with her in the blazing sunshine that the elders were wise enough to avoid.

The elder with the grizzled whiskers spat meditatively at a party of three foraging ants in the dust.

"Bill Turner's been feelin' amorous about Katy himself," he observed, "an' this Chip fella has sure got under his skin. If Bill bumps Chip, an' him not packin' a gun, we——"

The trio idled. Then they saw Bill Turner. He came out of the Pilgrim's Rest, wiping his mouth. His expression, as usual, was sour. He rolled a cigarette, scowling. He saw Chip Harlow talking to Katy. His scowl deepened. It became savage. It became deadly. His hand went to his hip and came away again. He strode furiously toward the chatting pair.

The three elders watched, electrified. They could hear no word of Chip's and Katy's conversation. That was conducted in the low tone in which young folks talk about nothing whatever. But the elders did hear Bill.

He stalked up to the absorbed young couple and bellowed: "You, fella, are you packin' a gun to-day?"

Chip was not surprised. Maybe he'd read the sudden fright in Katy's expression. He turned and said clearly, and his voice carried:

"Why, no, suh! I'm not packin' a gun. I'm man enough to do my fightin' without machinery."

Bill nearly foamed at the mouth. Chip had got on his nerves, anyway. The defiance of the day before was bad medicine. Bill was not used to being crossed.

"This heah lady," snarled Bill, "I been goin' to see her. I aim to go to see her to-night. An' I ain't lookin' for a critter like you to be crossin' my trail."

Chip swung and looked at Katy. "Ma'am?" Again his voice carried. "If theah's a—uh—understandin' between——"

Katy broke in scaredly: "There—there isn't."

"Then," said Chip grandly, "Mistuh Turner, the lady is sayin' it isn't any of your business who she talks to. An' you're annoyin' her."

Bill's voice was strangled. "I'm tellin' you," he panted, "to pack a

gun! I'm—tellin'—you—to—pack—a—gun!"

"Which I ain't goin' to do," returned Chip with fine composure. "An' I'm advisin' you, suh, that the citizens of this heah town are just achin' for a excuse to lynch you. The way you're carryin' on, you're lookin' for it!"

"Why, you—you——" gasped Bill.

His hand snapped to his hip.

But Bill did not draw his gun. He jerked his hand away from the holster with an actual, physical effort. He panted with pure rage. And then he swore furiously and stamped away, his always-reddish eyes redder than ever and the veins in his temples throbbing. Because, of course, to shoot an unarmed man would be murder.

THE NEWS of this second encounter went through all of Dos Aguas. The elders confirmed it, and the town discussed the matter absorbedly. The town was normally a peaceful one. It baked in the hot sun by day, drowsed by night—except that there was usually guitar music somewhere among the Mexican population—and remained very nearly the same from one year's end to the other.

Bill Turner had been the first interruption to its placidness in a long time. Now Chip's defiances of Bill were exciting.

Until that night—then they were thrown in the shade by a more exciting happening still. The bartender of the Pilgrim's Rest locked up the saloon and started home through the moonlight, yawning, with the day's cash accumulation in his pocket. And as he went down the steps from the back door something hit him from behind.

He woke up in the pale-gray light of false dawn. His head felt as if it was exploding continuously. He lay exactly where he had fallen, with one foot rather absurdly propped up by the back-door steps of the Pilgrim's Rest. And his pockets, of course, were empty—turned inside out.

The town buzzed. For the moment, even the feud between Chip and Bill became a minor item. What crimes Dos Aguas had known before were forthright assaults and frank and manly shootings for understandable reasons. Never before in its history had there been a crime with this stamp of deliberation and professionalism. It was sordid.

The elders discussed it with mounting indignation and no suspicions whatever. It was Chip Harlow who dropped a significant thought into the discussion.

"It seems to me," he said deliberately, "that somebody said Bill Turner didn't have any reg'lar way to make money. He don't earn anything, an' he don't win anything at poker, yet he lives."

He stood up and strolled away as the elders looked at each other. Chip had left the thought. He strolled grandly, leaving his suggestion to be pondered. And Bill hove in sight about then. He snarled at Chip, looking hungrily for a gun. But Chip was unarmed. He walked on, blandly unconscious of Bill's provocative glare.

Turner went into the Pilgrim's Rest. The elders regarded him speculatively through the open door. He ordered a drink and flung down a ten-dollar bill. The bartender picked it up, glanced at it, and gulped suddenly. His eyes went dazedly to the watching elders of Dos Aguas.

III.

THE BARTENDER told the elders about it afterward—hours later. The elders, being reasonable and cautious men, did not hasten to ask questions. It was all of an hour later that the three of them mentioned the matter over their four-o'clock drinks. Chip came in just as the subject was broached.

"Y-yeah," said the bartender; "I ast him. First I ast him if he'd heard about me bein' slammed over the head an' robbed las' night, an' he says yeah. He says that nobody could ever get away with anything like that on him, an' he wishes somebody'd try.

"So then I says that I'd admire right much to know who that son of a gun was that socked me. An' he says unpleasant that if it'd been him that somebody tried to rob, if anybody was curious they'd only have to look in the fella's casket an' identify him. An' then I asked him if he'd help me try to find out who socked me. He says 'If it ain't too much trouble. Gimme another drink.' An' I told him I thought I hadda clue. He looked damn mean, just then, an' says what kind?"

The bartender gulped once more and polished the bar nervously.

"So then I—I says that some of the money I was robbed of had been spent in my place by a gentleman I just plain knew wasn't the man that slammed me, an' I hesitated to ask him about it for fear of offendin' him. Then Bill Turner, he says, 'Huh! I'll ask him! An' he'd damn well better answer if *I* ask him somethin'! What y'want to know?'

"So I said I wanted right bad to know who'd passed on a certain bill to this gentleman. An' Bill Turner, he says what bill, an' I showed him that ten-dollar one that a Mex brought in yesterday mornin', torn in half, an' I glued it together. An' he looked at the bill an' says, 'Hell! I had that one! I found it this mornin'."

The bartender looked from one to another of his listeners.

"You know how Mistuh Turner is," he said. "I just said 'Hell! The fella musta lost it an' theah's my only clue gone.' Not wantin' to commit suicide, I didn't say no more. An' he drunk his drink an' went out. An' what in hell is a fella goin' to do?"

The answer was, of course, that he wasn't going to do anything.

But the elder with the gray mustache asked: "You reckon he's got the rest of the money you was robbed of? Did he flash a roll?"

"Nope; he didn't," answered the bartender. "An' I ain't speculatin' any on whether he's got the rest of it or not."

The elders meditated. Chip pointedly refrained from adding any comment. Flies buzzed. The bartender polished nervously.

"What we got to do," said the bartender apprehensively, "is see how long 'tis before somebody else gets—uh—slammed on the head. We know pretty well how much most folks around heah spend. All of us do. Theah was forty-two dollars in my pocket las' night."

Bill came back into the Pilgrim's Rest. The conversation ceased abruptly. He did not feel that was unusual. Conversations had a way of stopping when he came by. He leaned against the bar and explained the robbery of the night before to the elders.

"The man that done it," he said harshly, with great assurance, "is bound to be a stranger that ain't handy with a gun. Most folks would stick up a fella, givin' him a chance

to come across without gettin' hurt. Ain't many people that'd just hit a fella from behind to rob him."

That was true enough. Even if Bill Turner said it, it was true. If he'd stopped there, the elders would have taken it seriously. But he held forth, and the elders chafed as they listened. Bill was loud. He was offensively cocksure. He was nearly everything that would make a man tedious and irritating.

He jawed the three of them, browbeating them through pure habit to accept his opinion as unalterable fact. He made it fairly clear that nobody but Chip Harlow fitted all the facts of the robbery, and as he went out of the saloon he repeated:

"I'd like to see that fella try to rob me! If he does, you folks are goin' to have a funeral to celebrate!"

The swinging doors vibrated behind him. And the elder with the elk's tooth, with a bellyful of Bill Turner for the hundredth time, said morosely:

"Hell! Why didn't I devote my youth to developin' a fast draw instead of a good reputation? If I had, I wouldn't 'a' listened to more'n two minutes of that."

"Still," said the whiskered one, a judgmatic soul, "it's right about most folks usin' a gun to rob with. If I was aimin' to take somethin' from somebody, I'd think of a gun first."

CHIP had listened to Bill's oblique references to himself with an air of noble tolerance. But they'd got under his skin, just the same. Now he said hotly:

"Are you hintin' at me because I don't pack a gun?"

Everybody present had his nerves on edge through having listened to Bill Turner for better than half an hour. The judgmatic soul was peevish, anyhow.

"Hell, I wasn't thinkin' so, but it fits you same as anybody else. If you want to take it that way, go ahead!"

Chip stood up. For an instant the assembled ones expected a fist fight. But Chip said savagely:

"All right! I'll prove it wasn't me who's been robbin' by provin' who it was—him!"

It was clear that he referred to Bill Turner. He stalked out. The atmosphere of the Pilgrim's Rest cooled down to its normal somnolent calm. A fly or two buzzed drowsily. Somewhere in Dos Aguas a dog fight began and immediately ceased. The elders of the town sat peacefully in coolness and in shadow with the restful odor of all saloons, everywhere, about them.

"Now," said the elder with the gray mustache, "we'll be rid of him for a while. He's a dawg-goned noble young man."

"Yeah," said the whiskered elder. "Le's have a drink."

The matter seemed to be ended. But it was not. That night somebody else was hit on the head from behind and his pockets cleaned out. This time it happened to be Katy Morewell's father, and he had five hundred dollars in cash in his pocket from the sale of some steers.

IV.

THE ELDERS of Dos Aguas were men of wisdom and experience, and therefore they understood Chip Harlow. He would believe, of course, that Katy was an inspiration. And he would think that his love for her inspired him to brilliance of intellect. As a matter of fact, love does a lot of things to a man, but it does not improve his

brains, and the elders knew it.

Chip was in a mixed-up frame of mind, anyhow. He had come into town unheralded and had appeared in the nick of time to make a grandstand play in protecting a crippled Mex from the town's bad man. A pretty girl had seen this and admired him. Basking in her admiration—a woman's most dangerous lure—Chip had fallen head over heels in love with her.

Bill Turner was a nuisance, but so far Chip had come out on top in all encounters. This robbery business, however, was different. Now that her father had been the victim of a criminal, Katy Morewell expected Chip to do something. And the elders of the town had hinted that he, Chip, was just as much under suspicion as anybody else.

Chip raged. Because he disliked Bill Turner and felt a certain amount of apprehension every time Bill looked at him, he suspected Bill of being the robber. But it would be dangerous to accuse him without proof, and it might be more dangerous still to look for that. Chip hesitated, and then he went to the only person in Dos Aguas who ought to sympathize with him.

He went to the livery stable and hunted up the crippled Mex he'd so grandly championed against Bill Turner. The Mex was just grooming Chip's horse, and the animal was fidgety. But Chip explained the matter of the two crimes and the jam he was in.

"Ah-h-h-h!" said the Mex mournfully. "Eet ees bad. *Muy malo!* But thees bad man, sooner or later-r somebody catch heem."

"You got any idea who it is?" asked Chip hopefully.

"*Pero no, señor.*" The Mex sighed more mournfully still. "I am new in thees town. I don' know who ees bad character. But the señor who said I am horse thief, he ees bad man."

"Tell you what," said Chip, "you keep an eye on him for me. How about that?"

"Señor!" The Mex shuddered. "He ees bad man! Eef he catch me spying on heem, he keel me!"

That was, of course, exactly why Chip had felt a certain delicacy about spying on Bill himself. It was annoying, though, that the Mex felt the same way. It seemed almost ungrateful. Chip left the livery stable somewhat more gloomy than before. But that night his spirits rose to new heights, and his gloom was all forgotten.

He sat on Katy Morewell's front porch beneath a Dos Aguas moon. A dog howled in the far distance, and a Mexican serenade—a trifle less melodious than the dog's—twanged much nearer. A soft night breeze, Katy's soft eyes, her soft hand, ultimately her soft lips—and Chip Harlow ceased to be a sane and cautious young man.

He rose to new heights of impassioned adoration, and in consequence when he walked away from her house he strode upon air, and his promise to trap the villain who had swatted her father seemed easy of fulfillment; so easy, in fact, that he set about doing it at once.

He performed a fine feat of reasoning. Bill, of course, was his meat. But Bill packed a gun, while the robber used a club. Chip ensconced himself near Bill's rented shack and relaxed to dream dreams of Katy and to wait for Bill to come home.

He would come, of course, to get the club with which he did his robbing. When he went forth again, Chip would be on his trail. What he would do if he actually saw anything like a robbery—well, he didn't

like to think. But he would probably do something. Katy expected it of him.

Chip dreamed romantic dreams and waited vengefully. Sharp rocks stuck into him. Ants crawled on him. He wanted to smoke, and he would have liked a drink, but neither was practicable. A large round moon sailed higher and ever higher in the sky. Dogs howled. A belated Mexican continued to sing. Bugs made noises all around him.

Then he heard Bill approaching. He came on foot, of course, because his house was just on the edge of Dos Aguas. He strode toward the shack, and Chip watched from his hiding place.

Suddenly Bill stopped short. He stared down at the ground in the bright moonlight. He stooped over. Then he glanced quickly all around and struck a match.

Chip was a little distance away and could not see clearly. He caught a glimpse of something freshly green being extracted from the sand. He rose cautiously to see better, and one small sharp rock grated upon another one.

Bill whirled. He saw Chip's head as a dark shape which should not have been there, and instantly a gun roared. It was Bill Turner's gun.

Chip had been looking over a little rise in the ground. It saved his life. Because the bullet from Bill's hip line, going straight for his head, hit the forward slope instead and ricocheted six inches above Chip's hat brim. And Chip, being unarmed, went away from there.

The gesture with which Bill had got out his gun was flawless perfection. But the speed with which Chip got away from there was miraculous. His feet had wings, and all the remaining five shots Bill sent after him missed him clean.

V.

IN THE MORNING three things of note took place. The first was that Bill Turner reported boastfully that somebody had tried to hit him over the head and had lost his nerve. The robber had put a ten-dollar bill on the ground to get Bill to bend over to get his head swatted, and Bill now had that ten-spot. He implied that a mere scowl had scared away the criminal.

The second thing was that the livery-stable proprietor was discovered to have been slugged and robbed, being found senseless outside his stable. The crippled-up Mex had found him, and there was reason to believe that the ten-spot Bill flaunted was a part of his money.

And the third thing was that Katy Morewell considered herself insulted when Bill lifted his hat to her in the street and told him so frankly. She gave him, in fact, something of a tongue-lashing during which the elders of Dos Aguas—listening appreciatively—learned for the first time about the shooting of the night before and who it had been aimed at.

None of these things made the town feel any better about its solitary professional criminal. Most people thought he was Bill Turner. His story simply wasn't credited. Nobody else had been lured into a stooping position by a ten-dollar bill on the ground.

People wanted to believe him the criminal, anyhow, and Chip Harlow angrily refused to talk. He had seen Bill pick up the bank note, and his evidence might have made Bill's story more credible, but he refused to talk because he didn't want to admit running away.

Katy's tongue-lashing, however, had told Bill all he wanted to know

about Chip. For the dozenth time he was impelled to homicide. He had felt disgraced because he'd missed his target the night before. Now, learning it had been Chip, he felt enraged. And his rage grew as he realized that the ten-dollar bill he'd picked up was designed to incriminate him, and Chip's presence said he had planted it.

Bill put two and two together—a criminal who didn't use a gun, arriving in Dos Aguas at just about the time Chip Harlow had come; the planted money. It added up. Chip Harlow was the slugger. And Bill performed the same fine feat of reasoning that Chip had done. Bill would watch for him to get his club. He would catch him in the act of robbery. But Bill had no doubt about what he'd do if he caught Chip in the act of slugging somebody. He had no doubt at all.

And the elders of Dos Aguas read the signs and detachedly observed that Chip was trailing Bill and Bill was trailing Chip, and that something was bound to happen as a result. But they didn't notice the really miraculous thing about the whole affair. *Bill* was keeping his mouth shut. Every time his mouth opened to brag of his intentions, he put a drink in it. And that worked very nicely. He kept it up all day.

That night he trailed Chip to Katy's house and waited, gnashing his teeth, while Chip waxed romantic beneath the Dos Aguas moon. When he saw Chip kiss Katy lingeringly in farewell, Bill suppressed a howl of rage. He fancied that he was in love with Katy himself, as has been intimated.

Sizzling softly, he trailed Chip to his newly rented shack, and he settled down to watch. But Chip did not come out immediately with a club. And Bill had been forced to put a good many drinks in himself during the day in order to keep from talking. He waited, raging. Then he waited, peevishly. After that he waited, sleepily. And then he slumbered until wakened by an outrageous uproar in Chip's shack.

He was one of the first four or five people to reach the point of the disturbance. And Chip, in his shirt tails, was shouting furiously at the crippled-up Mex of the livery stable.

On the floor there was a particularly wicked-looking club. And the Mexican under the menace of Chip's glare—and another club—was babbling a wholesale confession of sins, which began with the intention of swatting Chip and stealing what money he had, and went back through the previous robberies in Dos Aguas even to the horse stealing of which Bill Turner had accused him.

"I am a poor man, señor," he moaned abjectly. "The Señor Turner, he beat me when he foun' I 'ad stole hees horse. I am creeple. I can do leetle. So I stole. Because men were not afraid of me, even weeth a gun, *I* heet them weeth a club an' took their money then. But I weel geev eet all back."

Bill roared: "An' you planted some of your cash on me to make folks think I did it!"

The Mex cringed more abjectedly still. "S-*si, señor,*" he whimpered. "You 'ad beat me."

But here Chip intervened. The elders of Dos Aguas, discussing the matter later, reasoned that in talking to Katy Morewell he had made a fool of himself and felt bound to continue the practice. In any case, he drew himself up and said nobly:

"We know about how much o' this Mex's story to believe. You got your hand on your gun, Mistuh

Turner. He knows if he admits that he's been committin' these crimes at your order, you'll plug him. Maybe we won't be able to prove that, but we'll know what to b'lieve."

Bill howled with rage. It was the one thing, said at the one time, that no possible evidence could ever disprove nor anything but Chip's lifeblood erase. Bill stood gasping with pure rage while Chip went on in fine indignation:

"Yeah! We know what to believe! He come to town to work with you, an' you pretended to hate him so's nobody'd suspect you were findin' out who had money for him to steal! That's the way you criminals work! An' now he knows if he tells the truth you'll bump him!"

Bill Turner foamed at the mouth. The only possible accusation more enraging than that of being the sort of thief who'd hit people from behind was, of course, that of being a lookout for a crippled Mexican who was that sort of thief.

He made incoherent noises of pure fury. Then he panted:

"Damn you! You'll pack a gun to-morrow an' I'll kill you!"

He turned and stumbled out of the place, while Chip laughed in noble scorn at the idea that he would demean himself by packing a gun so that Bill Turner could kill him.

He made quite an impressive picture, about then, standing over that crippled Mex with a club that was twice the size of the Mex's own. He looked quite noble.

VI.

THE ELDERS of Dos Aguas were worried, however, next morning. Dos Aguas was a peaceful town, but Bill Turner was its bad man. And he had stood plenty from Chip.

Bill, as has been said, had just one ability which applied exactly to the matter in hand, and one virtue which nobody then knew about. He was going to kill Chip. And at ten minutes after two p. m., mountain time, on the ninth day after the arrival of Chip Harlow in Dos Aguas, Bill Turner prepared to do it.

Katy Morewell came down the street. Bill stepped forth and lifted his hat. She glared at him. He stood before her and said with vast politeness:

"Ma'am, I'm doin' myself the honor to ask you to marry me."

The three elders heard it, loafing in the shade on the opposite side of the street. They jerked erect as one man. They stared at Bill Turner as if he'd taken leave of his senses. Everybody in Dos Aguas knew that Katy was going to marry Chip. Katy simply stared at Bill, thunderstruck by this proposal. And Bill said blandly:

"Silence givin' consent, ma'am, I'm takin' the privilege of a engaged man."

And he kissed Katy Morewell squarely on the mouth, on the public street of Dos Aguas, before the goggling eyes of the elders thereof, and knowing that Katy hated him as much as it is possible for a woman to hate a man she has never been married to. He kissed her three times and then drew back.

"I'll be up to see you to-night, ma'am," he said comfortably, "an' if that squirt of a Chip Harlow is theah, I'll make him wish he wa'n't."

And then he swept off his hat again and retired into the Pilgrim's Rest, where he stood himself two drinks in succession and beamed at the world.

He had reason to beam. Katy went home, weeping tears of which each one was a little liquid cuss

word. And after she got home she really got mad. Within half an hour all Dos Aguas knew that she had given Chip Harlow an ultimatum: He or Bill Turner must leave Dos Aguas. If Bill Turner, preferably in a box.

Within an hour, the town was full of rumors. Chip was leaving. Chip was looking for Bill Turner with a gun. Chip had revealed that he was "Kid" Brady, fastest man in the Southwest, and would kill Bill Turner without fail. Chip was making arrangements about where he wanted to be buried. Every possible rumor that fertile imaginations could invent went through Dos Aguas. And they were all wrong.

Because Chip was mad, clear through. He was just about as mad as Bill. And he was in love. And, besides that, he had the brash self-confidence of youth.

Bill Turner wasn't a young man any longer. He wasn't old, but he was close to forty, and that seemed senility to Chip.

So Chip got hold of a six-gun and a gun belt, locked himself in his cabin, and spent two intensive hours practicing. Of all the guesses made in Dos Aguas, only the elders hit on the truth. They'd guessed that Chip would be a fool.

The thing came to a head at six o'clock. Two hours of practice, of mounting indignation and resolution, had about hypnotized Chip. The gun was coming out smoothly. Chip saw himself as victor in a gun fight with Bill Turner as he had been victorious in every other encounter. He simply couldn't envision any other outcome.

So at six o'clock he marched out of his shack and swaggered down the main and only street of Dos Aguas. He was packing a gun. The three elders, just meditating their before-supper drink, saw him and blinked. Chip looked confident and cocksure, and therefore competent. For a moment he had even the elders of Dos Aguas bluffed.

"Boys," said the first, "we've got to see this!"

"It's goin' to be a frost," said the second skeptically.

"Prob'ly," admitted the third pessimistically. "Somebody always gets a bad man, but nature's noblemen we've got always with us."

The trio solemnly crossed the street and entered the Pilgrim's Rest ahead of Chip Harlow. Bill Turner was standing himself a drink. The three elders soberly made for the side wall. Their solemn entry and the bee line they made for a place other than the bar was warning enough. A hush fell over the Pilgrim's Rest. Men moved with studied casualness to be safe. Bill swung about, a drink in his hand, and watched the door hungrily.

THEN CHIP came in. He packed a gun. Bill gave a grunt of satisfaction. His always-reddish eyes glowed more redly still.

"You lookin' for me?" Bill asked. He still held his drink in his hand. "I was aimin' to look you up this afternoon."

Chip threw his head back. "Yes, suh!" he replied savagely. "I am lookin' for you! I'm heah to tell you that this heah town ain't big enough for both of us. One or tother is goin' to leave, an' whether it's on a horse or in a box is up to you."

Bill grinned. He was gloating, at this moment, because his one ability was that of getting a gun out faster than any other man in three States, and he was going to use that ability now.

"I'm stayin'," he said. "What're you goin' to do about it?"

"Me?" Chip swaggered. "I'm pullin' a gun." His hand snapped to his hip.

What Bill did then was braggadocio, no less. He held a drink in his hand. His hand jerked, tossing the contents of the glass neatly into his mouth. His left hand caught the glass, and his right went on down in an infinitely swift and deadly movement.

He was proving that the one thing he could do, he could do so superlatively that he dared even stop to take a drink while Chip Harlow was getting out his gun—and then beat him to it.

His gun did not seem to come out of the holster. One instant it was in, and the next instant it simply was out and lined up for Chip's heart. And the men in the Pilgrim's Rest saw Chip's face turn a shocked, astonished gray color. Because two hours' practice will not make anybody fast with his gun, or even certain. And Chip had fouled his gun on the front sight and couldn't get it out.

Bill held his fire, his eyes glittering. Chip went grayer and grayer, tugging at the gun that was fouled.

"Hell!" said Bill scornfully. "Quit it!"

He put his own gun back. He had but one ability, and he'd just showed it. No other man in creation could have played that trick with a drink while somebody reached for a gun to kill him. Bill had proved his ability to a superlative degree. And now he proved his solitary, isolated virture. He was a good winner. As long as Chip came out on top in their encounters he would hate him. But now——

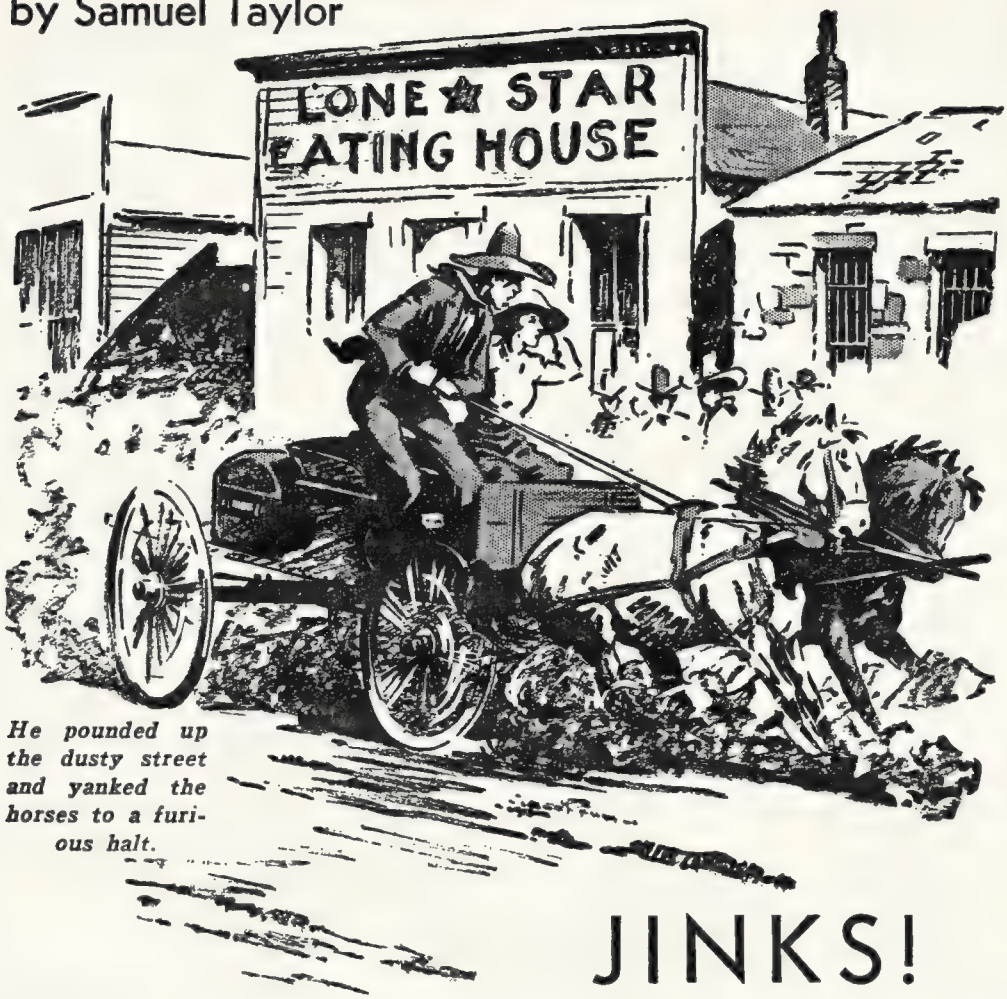
"You young damn fool!" rasped Bill. "I could 'a' licked you any time, fists or guns. But Katy likes you. As a favor to her I let you alone. But I'm leavin' town, an' if I lef' without givin' you a damn good lesson you'd be runnin' up against some fella maybe half as good as me, an' he'd blow hell outa you."

He turned his back on Chip, who looked very sick and scared. He poured himself out another drink, paid for it, and walked briskly out of the Pilgrim's Rest. Incredibly, he went and got his horse and rode on out of town. And he didn't come back.

Why? The elders of Dos Aguas argue about it to this day. Two of them insist that he was the orneriest and most useless human who ever walked on two legs. One of them, conceding so much, nevertheless maintains that there must have been some trace of decency about him. The fact is, of course, that he had just one ability and just one virtue. The virtue was that of being a good winner, which is rare.

One of the elders, however, has put forward the theory that Bill Turner left town because he'd kissed Katy Morewell on the public street. She demanded that Chip chase him out of town or kill him, and Chip failed. The most pessimistic of the elders considers that maybe Bill Turner knew women, and left town so that Katy wouldn't marry him to avenge herself at leisure.

by Samuel Taylor



He pounded up the dusty street and yanked the horses to a furious halt.

JINKS!

SHERIFF MILLER might have had a beautiful wedding if he had not been popped in the eye. He had ordered a last round of drinks for the boys and was just climbing into his buckboard when a stranger—a little, wizened cuss who had not shaved for a month and who did not weigh more than a hundred and forty-five—this stranger swung from his horse and with a simple casual motion hung a bony fist in Sheriff "Whip" Miller's eye.

Miller said not a word, but flailed out a big knobby fist, laying the stranger in a heap against the porch post. The sheriff turned to climb into his waiting buckboard. But somehow the little bearded fellow staggered erect and, shaking off the effects of the blow, dived and caught Miller's glossy boot heels.

The horses, obeying their good Western training, started the instant Miller set a foot on the flat-bed step. Miller abruptly had his legs pulled from beneath him. He caught a handhold on the seat, but by that time the rear wheel was traveling up the legs of his blue store suit. He let go and plopped in the red dust of the road, while the wheel made a brilliant streak up and over his chest.

"Whoa!" Miller bawled. "Whoa!"

One heaving kick knocked the little man away, then the sheriff gathered himself erect with surprising quickness considering his long bony length, and with one big hand he seized the little man behind the neck and jerked him erect while the other hand closed to a murderous fist.

Suddenly Whip Miller's taut rage relaxed. "Usually I'd poke your face so hard you'd hafta eat through the back o' your neck," he said. "But I'm gettin' married to-day, so I'll let you off. Shorty, throw this hombre in the can until he cools off."

The deputy, who had been grinning with the row of cowhands lined along the saloon porch watching the fray, took a bow-legged step to the ferocious pint-sized stranger. The fellow stooped for his hat—the only hair on his head was the bushy beard; otherwise he was bald—and accompanied "Shorty" to the whitewashed stone shack which held the jail and sheriff's office.

Whip Miller directed: "Somebody get a broom while I wash up."

The fat barkeeper secured a whisk and from the wash room came sounds of vigorous brushing in the attempt to get the red dust from the serge store clothes. Cowboys in the saloon eyed one another with broad grins.

The sheriff emerged from the wash room with his store clothes presentable. But one look at him and the cowboys burst out laughing.

"Would beefsteak do any good?" the sheriff inquired.

He felt tenderly at the blue mouse rising under his eye. The boys were too busy holding their ribs to answer.

THE BUCKBOARD was hardly a mile out of town when out of the tail of his eye Sheriff Miller caught sight of a streamer of pink dust. He reined in and waited while a madly galloping horseman bore down on him. It was the bow-legged deputy, Shorty.

"Whip! That hombre—that bald-headed little runt—he's tearin' the jail down brick by brick!"

"Why didn't you stop 'im?"

Shorty opened his sunburned eyelids. "How? He was already in jail, an' I didn't want to shoot the critter without more authority. That's why I come to see you. But hurry, sheriff! When I left he'd ripped the bunk off the wall an' was startin' in on the window casing."

Sheriff Miller wheeled his buckboard in an abrupt circle. His one eye narrowed to a determined slit —the other was already narrowed by the swelling bruise.

"If I wasn't gettin' married t'-day, I'd take time off an' kill somebody!"

Miller's long gangling legs took the distance from the hitching post to the threshold of his office in two gigantic steps. Another leap and he was through his office and to the barred cell in the rear. The bald stranger was standing in the middle of a pile of wreckage which recently had been the bunk, a table, and the window casing.

"Hello, sheriff!"

Whip Miller unlocked the steel door. "Get out!"

"Huh?"

"The town's celebratin' my weddin' to-day. You kin go."

"But, sheriff, I don't wanna go. I want to stay here."

Even as he talked, the stranger's beady little eyes surveyed the pile of wreckage eagerly.

"You wanna stay here!" mocked Whip. "You like it here, I guess! You wanna—" Miller strode across

the room as he spoke—"stay"—a tremendous hand yanked the other's shoulder—"here!"

With a swing of his long angular arm he shoved the little man headlong out of the grilled door.

The bearded little runt scampered like a rabbit and barely missed Whip Miller's outflung toe, then with another frantic jump the man miraculously avoided the other boot. The wizened stranger made tracks down the dusty road.

"Now you calm down, mister, or I'll——" The sheriff stopped. "If it wasn't my weddin' day I'd——" He gulped again.

"Or what?" sang out a cowboy from the happy group in front of the saloon. "What'd you do—throw him in jail?"

The sheriff ignored the remark. He rattled away in the buckboard.

TWO MILES out of town, the sheriff stopped his team. He shook his head; then habit got the best of him and he pulled off the road and held his team at a walk through the greasewood. His eyes—eye—squinted intently at the baked red soil and at the little mounds at the base of each bunch of greasewood and sage.

For fourteen years every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday evening Whip Miller had gone to see Sylvia Getker, whom he now was marrying. And on every trip he had traveled an extra two miles both ways, making a wide curve through the brush from Ambush Rock to the point in the road he had just left.

In addition to this, the sheriff had upon numerous sunny days forked his horse and rode back and forth along this particular stretch of brush until it was too dark to see. And always his eyes searched the ground.

The reason was simple. He was looking for a diamond engagement ring and a wedding ring, lost in this fashion:

Whip Miller and a dashing young curly-headed dandy called "Tennessee" Jones were rivals. Both were running for sheriff, and both were courting Sylvia Getker. She, despairing of ever making a choice, declared that the one who won the election for sheriff would also win her consent. Whip was elected by a plurality of exactly three votes, whereupon Tennessee made the rash statement that Whip would never marry Sylvia. To make his word good, Tennessee held up and robbed the stage which was bringing the mail-order engagement and wedding rings.

However, Tennessee's disappointment was such that, while he had the lock blown off the stage strong box, he could not resist taking a leather packet containing a bank shipment of twenty brand-new greenbacks of a thousand dollars each. The new sheriff was on his way home from the Getker ranch when he heard that Tennessee shot the lock off the strong box. He spurred his horse and reached Ambush Rock in time to give Tennessee a merry chase through the brush.

Whip Miller's horse was less than a hundred yards behind Tennessee's mount all the way, and a half moon gave fair visibility. Two miles out of town, the robber's horse stumbled and broke its neck just as Tennessee swung it into the road. Tennessee was himself knocked cold. The new sheriff brought him in across his saddle, locked him, still unconscious, in jail. When he returned with a doctor, Tennessee was awake, but groggy. Shortly thereafter Tennessee was a long-term guest of the State.

But no trace ever was found of

the leather packet containing the bills, nor of the little case having the mail-order rings. And Sylvia Getker, superstitious, refused to marry Whip until he should find the original rings.

"It's an omen," she stated flatly. "A sign for me not to marry you."

"But I'll get some more rings."

"Some more, indeed! No; them are my rings, an' I won't marry with any others. If I was supposed to marry you, then why should the rings get lost? It's an omen. An', anyhow, I'm not so sure but what Tennessee is really my soul mate, Whip. You shouldn't 'a' sent him to prison!"

And so fourteen years danced by.

So it was that the sheriff always cut through the brush. At last he had overcome Sylvia's objections, but he was still looking for those rings. And also there was the matter of two thousand dollars reward for the return of the twenty thousand dollars in greenbacks. That reward still stood.

"WHIP! Whip! Hurry!"

In one motion the sheriff swung over the front wheel and to his horses' heads. He was too good a horseman not to tie the hackamore rope.

"It's the telephone, Whip. Shorty's on the wire, and he's gettin' desperate!"

The sheriff whisked by Sylvia and seized the receiver of the magneto phone. "Hello!"

"Whip! It's this crazy little cuss!" came the deputy's agonized voice.

"The little bald-headed runt with the beard?"

"That's him! Listen, Whip, the guy's gone nuts! You gotta come tame him down!"

"Shut up, Shorty! Calm down an' listen. Throw the runt in jail and keep him there! He's busted as much as he can, anyhow."

"That's jist it, sheriff! I'm tryin' to keep him *outta* jail!"

"Huh?"

"Sure! I'm inside an' got the door locked, an' he's breakin' down the door with a crowbar or something!"

Through the wire sounded heavy thumps. The sheriff swore. "What the devil's he tryin' to git into jail for?"

"I dunno, but he's a-comin'!"

"Shoot the critter. I'll take the responsibility. Plug the fool!"

"Gosh, I can't do that, sheriff! All the boys, they're standin' around, havin' a good time. You know, it's your weddin' day an' all. I can't shoot him. But, sheriff—sheriff! He's bustin' the outside door! I'm lockin' myself in the cell pronto!"

There sounded a splintering crash, then a harsh metallic bump as Shorty dropped the phone. The sheriff heard Shorty's despairing howl and the clang of the cell door.

"Lemme in there!" bawled the voice of the bearded ball of fury.

"S-stay out!" came from Shorty. "Or I'll l-lose my t-t-temper!"

Whip Miller seized Sylvia's plump wrist. "C'mon, Syl! There's trouble in town!"

"Hey, Whip!" shrilled a voice. Old man Getker, Sylvia's father, stuck his head out of the front window. "Wait a second; I ain't got my pants on yet!"

But Whip already had cut the bangtails across the rump and was making a two-wheeled turn.

Sylvia said nothing for two miles; then she started. "It goes to show," she shouted above the pounding of hoofs and the rumbling of the flat-bed wagon.

"Huh?"

"I always said it was an omen when you lost them rings. This proves it."

THE RING of people around the jail was visible the instant Whip came in sight of the town. Every one for miles around was in for the ceremony, and they were all grouped about the little stone jail and the stable behind it. Whip pounded his lathered team up the dusty street and pulled the horses short, threw the reins to Sylvia and leaped. The circle of grinning people opened for him. Shorty met him.

"I couldn't keep 'im out!" wailed the deputy.

There was a hole chopped in the cobblestone rear wall. From inside came a furious thudding. Miller stuck his long head through the hole. The stranger was inside. He had a pick, and with lusty blows he was uprooting the plank flooring.

"Drop that pick!"

The bearded demon whirled and made a swipe at the sheriff's head.

Whip dodged like a turtle in its shell. "Shorty! Gimme your gun!"

The stranger dropped the pick, shrugged. "O. K., sheriff."

"Come out here. You ain't gonna go rippin' up our jail like a-that. By gad, I'll handcuff you to a stall in the stable before——"

"Tennessee!" It was Sylvia's voice, high, shrill, thrilled. "Tennessee Jones!"

Whip Miller looked at Sylvia. She had put on weight during the fourteen years he had waited for her to marry him. The sheriff looked at the wizened, bald, bearded runt—was this the straight, lean, dashing, dandy Tennessee Jones with the long curly-black hair? He would be taller without that stoop in the back. Prison had taken a lot of meat off his bones.

Whip Miller said: "Tennessee!"

"H'lo, Sylvia!" Tennessee smirked. "You done waited for me like you promised?"

The sheriff grunted. "So that's it? That's why you wouldn't marry me. You been a-waitin' fer this jailbird. It wasn't on 'count of them lost rings."

"Tain't, either! I jist told Tennessee I'd wait for him because he was goin' to prison and was so lonely and all."

The big, loose-jointed sheriff turned to Tennessee. "Then you done all this bustin' up and pokin' me in the eye, you done it just to make a fuss because I wus marryin' your girl, huh? Like when you stole the rings before? I got a good idea to pop you on the red nose!"

"Let him be, Whip!" commanded Sylvia. "You can't hardly blame him, at that. How long you been out, Tennessee?"

"Three months," came the voice from the scraggly beard. "Been workin' my way down to this country."

The tall Whip, looking over the heads of the crowd, announced: "Here's the preacher come. Let's get started on the weddin'. Will you behave, Tennessee?"

The other nodded.

Sylvia put her plump hand in the crook of Whip's bony arm. "I feel sorry for Tennessee," she whispered. "Prison sure was hard on him. You oughtn't 'a' sent him there in the first place."

THE VISITORS filed into the dance hall with happy smiles on their faces.

The sun was setting as the crowd milled inside. The preacher got up on the little platform by the hang-

dog piano. The sheriff and Sylvia made their way slowly, self-consciously, through the crowd. Tennessee made a third. Scrawny, bald, bearded, and dressed in a faded shirt and tattered clothes, he looked anything but the man of honor at a wedding.

Sylvia's motherly bosom heaved a sigh. "Gosh, Tennessee, I can't help thinkin' how much tough luck you've had!"

"Aw, it wasn't nothin'."

They were at the platform. Sylvia seized Tennessee's arm and pulled him up. The preacher beamed.

"Say, but your arm's skinny."

"I'm all right, Syl," protested Tennessee. He looked around as if searching for a place to escape.

The preacher cleared his throat politely. Whip Miller squeezed Sylvia's hand and whispered: "Be quiet, Syl. Pay attention."

But Sylvia was oblivious of everything but the bedraggled figure.

"You was always that way, Tennessee," she said. "Never a man to bellyache."

"Syl!"

The holy man was red in the face. From the crowd in the dance hall came a titter.

Sylvia paid no heed. "I remember when you was in jail that night, fourteen year ago, Tennessee. With your face all white-lookin', an' you a-staring out o' the bars at the moon. And your black curly hair an' all. I sneaked around an' talked to you."

Tennessee squirmed miserably. He was acutely conscious of the situation, and his beady eyes were darting like those of a trapped coyote's. On his forehead and the bald dome stood beads of perspiration.

The preacher started to say something, but Sylvia cut in:

"An' they went an' made a stable outta that very jail you was in. Imagine, a stable!"

"What?" barked Tennessee in a voice that made the whole audience jump. "A stable?"

"Sure! It was gettin' wore out, so they built another jail like it in front an' used the old one———"

"Stable!" howled Tennessee Jones. He made a wild leap off the orchestra platform and scrambled for the outside door.

"Stable!" screamed the lank Whip Miller. He made a leap twice as big as Tennessee's jump.

"Stable?" asked Sylvia. She followed.

The preacher tagged along. The whole assembly suddenly became almighty curious and surged toward the outside.

THE SCAMPERING, ratlike figure was nearing the doorway of the stable behind the jail when lank Whip Miller made a desperate dive. His long stomach smacked the ground, but his big hands clutched Tennessee's boots, bringing him down. Tennessee kicked furiously and scrambled on hands and knees into the dimness of the stable. Also crawling, the sheriff lumbered after.

"The horses!" screamed Sylvia.

Every one knew there were two half-broken mustangs in that stable, the riding mounts of the sheriff and his deputy.

There came thuds, stamping, a groan, splintering impacts of terrified horses' hoofs. Cowboys edged cautiously to the door, then scampered as a bangtail barged wildly out of the door with a frayed halter rope trailing. The other horse followed, dangling a broken hackamore. The animals dashed down the road.

Conflict was still raging in the old stable jail. The sheriff's voice sounded a grunting oath, then Tennessee squealed. Scratching. Thuds. Wheezing breath. Suddenly the scuffle silenced. The crowd tensed, watched the slowly rising dust waft from the door in the twilight. There came a wrenching squeak. Sylvia gasped. A length of plank flooring hurtled out of the window and plopped in the dust. There came another wrenching squeal as a second plank was ripped up.

Then appeared the sadly treated figure of the lank sheriff in his new store clothes. Both sleeves were hanging by mere threads at the shoulders, while one knee showed a ten-inch length of white underwear through the hole. Both eyes were now puffed almost shut, and his cheek was scuffed where a wild mustang had barely grazed it.

But nobody looked at the sheriff. They stared at his big paws. He held two moldy objects. One was a rotten leather packet; the other a decayed plush box.

"Folks," he announced, "here's the long-lost proceeds o' the famous stage robbery here fourteen year ago. An' while these greenbacks are stuck together an' won't stand pickin' up, hardly, the dry climate's kept 'em good enough to collect that two thousand reward. Here, Syl"—he grinned and extended the little box—"here's our old weddin' an' engagement rings. I 'member the old catalogue pictures of 'em together in a classy plush box."

Sylvia made a rush, but instead of flinging herself into his fond, outstretched arms, she ducked and caught the little bearded Tennessee Jones, who was staggering from the dusty stable rubbing a lump on his bald dome.

"Tennessee! Did that big brute hurt you?"

"I was savin' it for you—me an' you," mumbled the little man. "Had it in my boot when my horse stumbled that night after me robbin' the stage. Didn't want you to marry—him. An' when I come to in jail I hid the money an' the rings. But I was so foggy I couldn't remember jist where—still groggy. But all the while in prison I figgered on comin' back an' gettin' them——"

"Oh! You come back for me!"

"An' wrecked my jail, lookin' for your danged loot!" broke in Miller.

"You shut up, Whip!" snapped Sylvia. She caressed the bruises of the little man.

The gangling sheriff rubbed his chin. From his swollen eyes he viewed the crowd; he looked at the plump Sylvia cooing over the wizened Tennessee; he surveyed the preacher; he observed the packets he held in his hands.

At last he scratched his head and announced: "Folks, we got the preacher an' we got the hall, an' we've got the crowd, an' the big weddin' dinner's a-cookin'. Why not have a weddin'?" He handed the moldy plush box to Tennessee. "Here—here's some rings, feller. And folks!" The sheriff held up his long arms for silence. "I got two thousand bucks in reward money comin', an' danged if I don't feel like celebratin'. They's a big load off my chest after worryin' about this marriage one way and tother for so long. I feel better, jist 'cause it's settled. Let's make a night of it! Cut loose, boys—an' the jinks are on me!"

He pantingly contrived to catch the rope to him.

The Sheriff Bumps His Head

by Harry Lynch

PLACIDLY engaged in cleaning his old six-gun, Sheriff Billy Masters glanced casually at the stranger. He shook his head as if to dispel the sight and then sighed deeply. Confronting him was a tall, masked bandit, with a steadily leveled pistol—a holdup.

"You will pleeze attend!" the stranger ordered.

All day long the sheriff had been guarding the empty New Mexican municipality of San Esteban. Booted feet on his office desk, plump hands folded across a generous paunch, he had peacefully dozed through the heat of the desert afternoon while the town dozed with him.

Just now, with a bottle of sweet

oil, a pencil, and a bit of rag, he was busy and didn't want to be bothered. Standing lone guard on an entire town with the thermometer doing its hellish best to pass one hundred and ten degrees in the shade was chore enough, without a holdup.

The man across the desk was regarding him sharply. "Up!" he barked.

Billy obediently raised his oil-smeared hands. Professionally he noticed that the fellow was using an automatic, a weapon new to New Mexico back in 1912, but one already treated with respect.

Sheriff Masters was alone. Everybody else, everybody, had joyfully journeyed that morning to the Ranch Quinerido, where there was to be a rodeo, cool beer, heavy eating, and big doings generally. Only the sheriff, by virtue of his office, had been forced to remain at home and see that nobody looted San Esteban's shiny new bank.

The bandit might have been anybody. He was dressed in the moleskin pants and checkered shirt then inseparable from the range, his eyes shaded with a regulation dust-gray sombrero. The mask was merely a blue cotton handkerchief over his face. But the flat little gun was held unwaveringly; the hard eyes were steady. He meant business.

Billy Masters allowed a full minute to go by, waiting for the other's lead. No use in calling a man's hand until he had made his bet. But the officer was careful not to change his position, not to stir hand or foot.

The hot little room was very still. Outside the olla creaked drearily on its cord; the rising wind sent hissing dust-devils swirling across the empty street; but there was no other sound. Billy looked the tall man over carefully and waited.

"You will pleeze attend." Again the cold voice spoke.

"Yeh! I'm attendin', bub. What's on your mind?"

"Thees town is all deserted. The people, they are vamose." It was a statement, not a question.

"Gone to the rodeo. Nobody here but jest us two girls."

"So! Then you will stand; the hands you will keep elevate."

Lumbering to his feet, hands aloft, the sheriff thought regretfully of his dismounted revolver, thought, too, of the utter futility of resistance, for very little bluffing was done in the range country twenty-two years ago. One untoward movement would mean that the automatic would roar once, perhaps twice. Then, indeed, the bandit might well be over the mountains before the first whooping drunk returned from the rodeo.

"You will now," the masked man ordered, "go to the cells. Now!"

He directed the gun at the sheriff's midriff, and the officer winced in spite of himself. Belly-shooter, hey?

The cells! A high compliment to the San Esteban jail, since a single cell was its entire equipment. It was a big steel cage, really, situated near the corner of the room, and, with the wooden desk, completed the entire equipment of the sheriff's office. With the cold muzzle of the gun prodding his fat stomach, Billy obediently backed toward the grating.

To resist would be taking a desperate chance. The gun was prodding him, cold eyes bored into his. But there wasn't any sense in being locked in his own jail, when it came to that.

THE BANDIT reached with his free hand to swing open the un-

locked grating, and as he did so Billy swept an arm swiftly down to the gun. Almost he seized it, but his gesture, quick and unexpected as it was, warned the robber.

Billy succeeded in knocking the muzzle downward, and with a revolver the maneuver might have succeeded, but this was an automatic, not much bigger than the man's hand. It exploded harmlessly but thunderously. The sheriff whirled to defend himself and, throwing one arm around the other man, vainly tried to reach his throat, but Billy's hands were slippery with sweet oil, and then, quite suddenly, it was all over.

He received a hard punch to the jaw and was thrust into the cage. In a daze he saw the door slam, saw it locked with his official keys, which, on their rawhide string, were contemptuously tossed through the open doorway to the dust of the plaza.

"So! Abide here, then," said the voice behind the handkerchief. "They will presently come to let you out. And when they come all will be as before, except"—he paused, grinned—"except theese bank will not have so many dollaire."

He bowed from the hips, swung out of the door toward the bank that Billy had been expected to guard, but the sheriff, sourly watching through the bars, shook his head.

"Tried to talk like a Mex, tried to act like one, but he ain't one. Oh, well!" He sighed heavily.

His eyes were on the keys, shining there in the hot dust. He studied them for a space, spat thoughtfully, shrugged. "Mebbe," he muttered; "jest mebbe."

The position of the cage allowed a narrow passageway along two sides of the adobe room, and pegs were everywhere driven into the wall, holding chaps, bridles, a battered hat or two—this thing and that. One peg was adorned with a looped reata.

Making a long arm, the sheriff pantingly contrived to catch the rope to him. Like every man holding office those days, he'd been a cowhand once. Of course he was fat and out of practice, but perhaps if he tried, his hands might remember —just maybe.

And he'd try plenty!

He, sheriff of the county, left to guard the bank, locked in his own cell while a bandit made free with San Esteban's money! What a tale that would make around the dancing camp fires! Too well he knew the sardonic humor of the range, knew that the joke would resound at every water hole up and down the dry Jemez, knew that it would never be forgotten, would grow with the slow years, would at last pass into legend.

"If they come back an' ketch me here, like a danged canary bird in a cage," he lamented, "I'll shore have to high-tail it out o' the country and stay out the rest o' my days."

He must get the keys.

Thrusting plump arms through the bars, Billy painfully coiled the rope and set about his almost-hopeless job. Coil and cast, coil and cast. It wasn't too easy, hampered as he was, to get the loop cleanly through the doorway, not too easy, even then, to drop it over the keys, glistening on their rawhide string—not easy, but not impossible.

When, once in three or four trials, the rope fell fairly he would retrieve it delicately, steadily, as a patient angler plays a wary fish. Sometimes the lariat slid smoothly over the keys, but sometimes he

gained a few inches. Once the wards of one of the keys caught, and he breathlessly teased his prize several feet before the hold slipped.

Coil and cast, coil and cast.

Billy had dragged the keys into the room now, for there had been no threshold to surmount. Hard-packed earth inside, blowing yellow dust without, and everything built to ground level in the old approved fashion. Six feet away, then, lay freedom.

He took a brief breathing spell, rubbing fat arms scored deeply by the chafing bars, while moisture trickled over his bald dome, fogged his eyes; then he went back to his patient fishing. How long to rob a bank? He didn't know.

Stooping now, he cast the rope smoothly along the floor. Once the bight hit the keys and knocked them back a precious foot, to be recovered in ten minutes' patient labor. Only two feet away now. Only six inches. He could almost reach——

Boooooooom!

Billy started up, cursing, as the sound of one explosion after another tore through the silence, shattered the somnolent peace of the town. So the skunk had got to the strong box at last. Clubbing the loop he reached out desperately, thrashed at the floor, and miraculously the keys were in his hand.

At the moment he saw a shadow cut across the dazzling whiteness without. The rope flicked to the darkest corner of the cell, and he planted an ample foot over the keys as the bandit peered in.

"All is well, señor," the masked man said smoothly, as the hot wind fanned the dust about him.

Would the fellow enter? Would he remember about the keys? If so, then Sheriff Billy knew that he would die swiftly, like a trapped rat.

But the robber had returned only to gloat. "I go to the fiesta," he said. "There I tell your friends that you are guarding the jail, because the bank—he does not need a guard now."

The shadow was gone, and with hurried sweating fingers Billy swung the cage wide, sprang for his gun, flung himself into the open. He hadn't been two minutes, he would have sworn, but——

FAR ACROSS the mesa was the black speck of a flying horse, moving at a gallop. How he knew at that distance that it was a horse, how he knew it was galloping, he could not have told, but he did know, and any desert-bred man would have guessed as well. Only the thief was not headed for the rodeo, but was flying in the opposite direction.

The sun-drenched plaza danced in the heat. The bank building, a new, small structure of yellow brick, San Esteban's proudest eyesore, blinked at him innocently with its two imported plate-glass windows. Shaking his head, still hoping that the whole thing had been a nightmare, Billy waddled across to the building, gazed disconsolately at the dismal interior, shook his head.

The place was a wreck. Repeated blasts had not only blown the door off the small vault, but the furniture itself had been destroyed. The walls were defaced; the floor was now a gaping hole; the blinds had been torn from the windows. The sheriff gazed absently at the picture of the bank manager, smiling down on the havoc from its frame on the wall, and again shook his head.

"Nothin' left to guard, for a fact," he said to the surrounding silence. "Well, I got to round that bird up

before he fades outa here entire—if I can find him. An' if I can't, I might as well fade, for good an' all, myself."

Sourly he saddled, prepared to ride, taking care first, as any good horseman would, to place a folded blanket over the mare's back as a protection against saddle galls. But as he started to ride he bethought himself.

"Why not?" he asked. "Why not?"

Dropping the reins, he returned to the office, gathered lint, bandages, an ancient bottle of arnica, a roll of adhesive tape. He paused, felt tenderly, almost affectionately, his bald pate.

"Well," he suddenly snarled, "what you waitin' for, you white-livered chuckwalla? Scared, hey? No; it won't hurt your brains, you poor tripe, because you ain't got any brains."

He lowered his head, swiftly and deliberately cracked his skull against the sharp corner of the steel-cell door. The little room rang with the impact, blood spurted.

"Again!" Sheriff Masters gritted. "Once more! Take it an' like it!"

Bang went the head the second time.

Straightening painfully, he gazed at his battered bleeding reflection in a bit of mirror.

"Now," he remarked, "never let anybody tell you that you ain't plumb loco, old-timer, but mebbe it'll help; jest mebbe."

Let any bandit now make the preposterous claim that he had locked Sheriff Masters in his own jail without so much as a struggle, and that the sheriff had lain there helpless until released by grinning neighbors. The loss of the money troubled Billy only remotely, and the escape of the bandit irked him but little more. There was always a good supply of bandits.

But the sudden stripping of his office and prestige were calamities to be averted if at all possible, even at the expense of an elaborate and painful alibi.

Some ten minutes later a heavily bandaged fat man hit the trail, the red mare proceeding at a sedate walk. Fine dust tormented his eyes, stung his plump jowls, coated the side of the sweating mare, and all but obliterated the fresh tracks of the bandit's horse; but Billy followed patiently.

He was puzzling about the bank. Bank robberies were no new thing to the territory, but the Western method, which was later to become the general method, was a sudden bold invasion during the hours of business, a volley of hoarse commands, the banging of big guns, then spurring out of town with the loot to the accompaniment of popping artillery.

But that wasn't what puzzled him as much as it was the wreck that had been made of the interior, a wreck that seemed wholly out of proportion to common sense. Why blow the place to kingdom come?

Pondering these matters, he suddenly brought his horse to a standstill. The dimming tracks of the bandit's horse were swinging in a wide circle.

"He ain't headin' for the mountains," observed Billy judicially. "That hombre figured that the sand storm had covered his trail, and now he's goin' through the canyon. He'll get over to the rodeo, as he said, kind of mix with the crowd millin' around there, an' then who's to find him ever? The son of a gun!"

But Sheriff Billy did not at once turn and spur toward the Ranch Quinerido. Instead he stared long

over the deserted mesa, thinking deeply.

"The son of a gun," he repeated softly, in incredulous surprise at his own thought. "Mebbe; jest mebbe." He turned back to the empty town.

WHEN he reached San Esteban, the sheriff methodically looked after the mare, returned to the bench at his doorway, and placidly reposed while the afternoon wore on. He had a plan, not much of a plan, perhaps, but the best he could contrive. And he might guess right.

The baby sand storm blew itself out, the sun dropped swiftly, and presently on the rim of the horizon he could descry a faint cloud of dust. Patiently he watched it grow.

"Time to be doin' it." He sighed.

He entered the jail, carefully locked himself in the cage, then with the heel of his boot he kicked a hole in the earthen floor and buried the keys. The first riders whirled into town as these preparations were completed. Calmly the sheriff waited.

Hard on the pounding of the horses' hoofs came surprised exclamations, high-pitched questions, shouts. The riders had discovered the looted bank. Swiftly the ponies swung across the plaza to the sheriff's office, and a score of San Esteban's first citizens crowded into the room. There they stopped, breathing hard.

Sheriff Masters lay on the floor of the cage, apparently dead.

"Poor Billy!" said "Pecos" Johnson softly.

"Here, let's get him out."

"Can't. Door's locked. They've drilled him, throwed him in here, an' then robbed the bank. He's gone, boys."

"Go get Cavanaugh, somebody, an' see if Doc Peters is back."

The doctor had not yet reached camp, but Cavanaugh, the bank manager, hastily summoned, looked with hard eyes at the still recumbent figure.

"So that's the man we left on guard here!" he commented bitterly.

Very naturally he was upset because of the robbery, but at his tone Pecos Johnson regarded him sourly.

"He's give up his life for the derned bank, anyhow, mister."

"How do you know he's dead?"

"Look at him."

He looked very completely dead, lying on the hard floor in the half light, but Cavanaugh only shrugged.

"Get him out; get him out. Maybe he's only unconscious. If they killed him, why would they take the trouble to bandage that thick skull? Tell me that."

"That's a fact, his head is all wrapped up. Only we can't get him out; he's locked in."

"Well, look for the keys. They'll be around somewhere. The robbers probably didn't carry them off."

But the keys could not be found.

"Go over to the blacksmith shop," some one suggested. "Get a metal saw, an' we can cut the bars."

The figure on the floor stirred slightly, moaned.

"He ain't dead yet!"

Pecos seized the olla, cascaded a gallon of water over the sheriff's head, and the officer, after a preliminary groan, tried to sit up, then collapsed weakly. "Get him out; get him out! Get that saw, some one!"

The injured man was muttering now, and the growing crowd was hissed sharply to silence while those nearest the cage anxiously bent to hear.

"Keys," came the husky whisper. "Gone—five of 'em jumped me—done me up——"

ANYTHING can be done. Four of the leading lights of San Esteban, spelling one another, contrived in something more than an hour to worry the saw through the lock, during which time the sheriff occasionally groaned restlessly, tried again to sit up, only to fall dizzily. Once he called plaintively for a drink, and a depleted bottle was tossed to him.

"If he's able to call for liquor, his senses is comin' back," observed "Hard Winter" Jackson judicially.

Cavanaugh, searching the sheriff's desk for keys, grunted his disapproval of the sentiment.

They got Billy out at last, dosed him anxiously with the liquid dynamite that was then the desert's panacea, were at last rewarded when Billy opened his eyes.

"The bank!" he gasped, "the bank!"

He tried to rise, but kindly hands pressed him back.

"The bank has been looted, Mr. Sheriff," said Cavanaugh acidly. "You were supposed to be guarding it. We are waiting for your explanation."

Black looks from the others. Why kick a man when he was down? But the sheriff regarded his questioner calmly.

"Five of 'em," he said; "five. Kinda help me get up now, boys, I'm feelin' a mite stronger. Anybody got another drink?"

They supported him to the bench outside, where the cool evening breeze from the distant Cebellots caressed his bloody head, held him with rough tenderness while he concocted his wondrous tale.

"I was settin' on the steps o' the bank," he began, "I had my six-gun, and was keepin' a sharp lookout, when I seen a feller comin' from the nawth. He was comin' all by his lone, and I never paid him no minds till he got here. He was a rider, he said, from up Paladore way, and he wanted to know how to get to the rodeo. Well, jest as I was tellin' him, up comes two more boys, bound the same way."

"You saw nothing strange in this meeting?" demanded Cavanaugh sharply.

"Why should I? There's a dozen drifters through this here town every day, ain't they? Sure! Well, while I was tryin' to tell 'em where to go, they ganged on me. One of 'em hit me an awful clip on the back of the head, and, before I could turn, another let me have it, an' out I went, cold."

He paused and pressed a hand to his head, took a conservative drink, resumed:

"Well, gents, I come to, kind of, when the explosion let go, and then five fellers come pourin' out o' the bank and made for their ponies. Five of 'em; I never seen the others come. I was pretty groggy, naturally, but I got up and tried to stop 'em. I got one of 'em in the jaw with my fist an' knocked him sprawlin', an' then I unlimbered my gun an' let 'em have it.

"They whirled back at me then an' knocked the gun outa my hand, an' one of 'em, the biggest one—seemed like he was the leader—whanged down on me again, but I wouldn't let go of him, so for a while I fit 'em, an' me with no gun, neither."

"Fought all five of 'em?" asked Pecos.

"Sartin. Had to. Only the one I laid out with my fist, he jest did have the strength an' sense to get on his cayuse. I near tore that big feller's clothes offa him, an' he's got two black eyes and a part o' one ear missin' right now. Yeh! But

they fin'ly clubbed me off, which because o' that first clip on the head I wasn't what you might call up to my usual gait, an' then they jumped their ponies and went out hell for leather."

"And then?" demanded Cavanaugh.

"Why, then I kind of scratched around and got my gun and let 'em have it again, but I was pretty woozy, you understand, and I didn't get in any real good shootin'. Only got two of 'em. I seen 'em slouch in their saddles, but the rest of the gang closed in, an' they headed for the lava beds. Likely we can round 'em up come to-morrow, because they're all beat up pretty bad, and two of 'em, like I say, got shot. That's all."

THERE was a moment's awkward silence. Hard Winter looked at Pecos Johnson, who stared at "Easy" Donohue, who in turn looked at the sky. A natural delicacy prevented asking the question that was in everybody's mind. Only Cavanaugh, doubtless thinking of his looted bank, had no such restraint.

"It was quite a battle, Mr. Sheriff."

Sheriff Billy blinked at the harshness of his tone. "Purty fair, while it lasted, Cavanaugh, pretty fair ruckus, only I wasn't what you'd call at myself."

"If you had been in your usual form, I suppose you could have handled them?"

Billy spat contemptuously. "They wasn't but five of 'em."

"True, only five. I had forgotten the count. Then, I suppose," he went on with deliberate emphasis, "you locked yourself in your own jail, so as to be all ready for the next gang?"

Half of the camp had returned by now and was in a close-packed circle around the group. One or two of the men grinned.

"Why, no, Mr. Cavanaugh; that wasn't the way of it; not precisely. If I'd had the stren'th to do that I could 'a' gone after 'em an' got 'em. No. I passed out again, and I suppose they must have curved back to town, them that was able, and, seein' me dead to the world, so to speak, flung me into the cell and locked me up. They wasn't takin' no chances on me bein' on their tails when I come to."

He lifted a bloody hand to his head tenderly. "These here wounds is botherin' me right smart, I'm free to say, but I can still lead a posse. Why"—he broke off in surprise—"I'm all bandaged up! Did you boys do that?"

"You was that way when we come, Billy," explained Pecos. "Them bandits must have fixed it for you."

"But why?" demanded the sheriff. "Why didn't they let a little daylight through me when they had the chance? They'd know that if they left me on top o' the ground I'd round 'em up, sartin, sooner or later. I can lay my hands on 'em yet."

"I can tell you why, you thundering liar!" It was Cavanaugh, in a towering anger. He turned to the crowd. "You've heard our brave sheriff. You've heard how he battled with five bandits. He says he can lay his hands on them. He can! There sits all five of the bandits, gentlemen." He flung an accusing arm toward Billy. "He robbed the bank, bandaged his thick head, and locked himself in his own jail!"

There was a deep silence, broken at last by Hard Winter. "Why, no,

Mr. Cavanaugh," he protested. "I don't think old Billy here would go for to rob the very bank he was ridin' herd on. I believe his story, kind of. He's sure been mauled up handsome."

Cavanaugh laughed shortly, evilly. "Come in here," he said, "and I'll show you a few more things to believe."

He strode into the building, the others pressing after him.

"Look!" he commanded.

He opened one of the drawers of the sheriff's ancient desk and pointed dramatically. "Look!"

IT WAS a package of bills, neatly banded with the bank's official seal. Cavanaugh tossed the package onto the desk.

"Fifties," he said. "I wasn't looking for them—didn't expect anything of the kind, of course. I was searching for those keys when I came across the money. I left it there, waiting to hear what our sheriff had to say. Can you explain the presence of a thousand in new bills in your desk, Sheriff Masters?"

"I might," replied Billy, blinking.

"Your money, I suppose?"

"Why, no! No; I ain't been able to save that much outa my seventy-five a month, seems like. That's bank money."

"Exactly! And do you expect us to believe that wild tale you just told?"

Billy grinned faintly. "Over on the Pecos I was counted a pretty good liar. O' course, I'm a little out of practice, but——"

Cavanaugh swung to the interested, amused, incredulous crowd. "This man," he said, "was alone in this town for seven hours. We return to find the bank wrecked, to find the sheriff locked in his own jail, to listen to a wild tale of five bank robbers, and to see a faked bandage. Nothing happened here except that our sheriff robbed the bank and hadn't been able to hide all the loot by the time we got back. Look!"

With a swift motion he tore the bandage from the sheriff's head. "Not a mark there!" he cried.

But at sight of the freshly bleeding wounds, looking much worse than they really were, he stepped back with a gasp and the crowd growled angrily. This was too much.

Easy Donohue took a threatening step. "Mebbe Billy done what you said he done," he began, "but when you start——"

Sheriff Billy interposed. "That'll be about all," he said quietly. "Into the cell, Cavanaugh. Boys, there's your bank robber."

"You fools!" Cavanaugh shrieked, as the sheriff started to propel him to the cage. "Don't you see? He's trying to get away. He'll throw the blame on anybody so he can have time to escape. You'll have to prove this, my man," he said with venom to the sheriff.

"Shore I'll have to prove it, Cavanaugh," Bill agreed placidly. "Might as well pin it on you right now, so the boys here'll understand."

He whirled the bank manager into the circle of the men. "Stand there," he barked, suddenly grim, "and don't let your hands start for your gun, neither, while I talk a little.

"Boys, I want that you should look yourselves over. All of you rid through a little wind comin' back here and got a lot of sand blowed into your clothes, didn't you?"

"Shore did."

"Still there, ain't it?"

"Certain! You know it's hard to

get the danged stuff out, Billy. Why?"

"Which side o' you is the sand on?"

"Why, left. We was ridin' east, from the ranch, an' the wind was off the lava beds, in the nawth, so natchelly our east sides got it, which was on our left."

"Yeh! But if a man had sand on both sides, had sand blowed into his clothes from every-which direction, how would he 'a' been ridin', say?"

"East and west both, seems like," hazarded Hard Winter, like a small boy in a schoolroom. And even as he spoke his eyes, and the eyes of every man in the room, traveled toward Cavanaugh.

Desert dust clings. Desert dust blows into a man's clothes and stays there.

THE SHERIFF waited while the men made their mute appraisal, while they stared at the bank manager, who was coated on every side with the golden-yellow dust of the desert.

"Any of you know whether this Cavanaugh left the rodeo during the exercises?" he inquired mildly.

The men stared at one another.

"They must 'a' been five, six hundred men there, Billy," replied Easy. "Nobody knowed where anybody was."

"So I robbed the bank because there was dust on my clothes!" said Cavanaugh with a short laugh. "And I suppose I put a thousand dollars in your desk?"

"That's whatever," Billy agreed.

"You poor fool! Call that evidence?"

"Kinda! That an' some more things. First off, no stranger would have been so positive the town was empty of folks without prospectin' around to see. Then, when you blowed that bank, they was no sense tryin' to make it look so good. You didn't have to tear down the curtains and bust them two new chiny spittoons to blow the safe, and regular robbers wouldn't 'a' done it. They'd just cracked the safe and vamosed. An' then, Cavanaugh"—he paused and looked steadily at the banker—"the reason you was so shore I wasn't hurt none was because you knew you hadn't left any mark on me. How else could you be so danged certain?"

"You are an officer of the law," interjected Cavanaugh harshly. "You should know that you can't hold a man on that sort of evidence."

"Might! Anyway, I got a little more. Boys," he said, turning to the others, "I didn't tell you quite the straight of this thing a minute ago."

"We knowed that, but it was pretty good lyin', Billy," offered Easy Donohue generously.

"I kinda had a reason," the sheriff continued. "I was trying to smoke this hombre out, as you might say. Fact is, I wasn't at the bank. I was settin' here, cleanin' my gun, when this robber comes bargin' in. He stuck me up an' flung me in the cell there, but we had a little scuffle. I mind I tried to choke him, and I braced myself by clappin' my left hand to the flat o' his back."

He was getting at something. The men eyed him intently, waiting.

"I had sweet oil on that hand, boys," he continued. "Somewhere there's a bank robber with the print of my hand, my signature, so's to speak, on his shirt back.

"Now, I'll be fair." He faced them strongly. "Dust this man off. If he ain't got my handprint there,

I'll forget all I said—even what I think about him plantin' that thousand dollars in my desk. I'll own I'm the liar of the world, an' that I robbed the bank. There's my bluff, gents, call it!"

A swift, wordless, scuffle, and Cavanaugh sprang for the door; a harmless shot, an oath, and then the man was firmly held. Gripping him, Hard Winter brushed his back vigorously and there, appearing by magic out of the yellow dust, was the print of a large left hand.

"There's where I writ my name." The sheriff nodded. "Likely you'll find the money in his saddle blanket, for he was all set for a getaway jest now."

Cavanaugh's vicious lunge carried him past the sheriff, and as Easy tripped the flying manager he landed asprawl on the floor of the cell.

"Back home," said Billy briefly.

IT WAS after the money had been retrieved from the restless pony, after the cell door had been carefully wired shut, that the sheriff asked a question.

"Was it all over at Quinerido, boys, or will there be some carryin's on to-night?"

"Sure, plenty of doin's. We jest come back here because Cavanaugh said he was worried about the bank. Figgered to bring some witnesses and pin it on you, likely. Sure there's more doin's. We're goin' back."

"Was there any beer?" the sheriff persisted.

"Plenty! An' they got half a ton of ice down from Quenado."

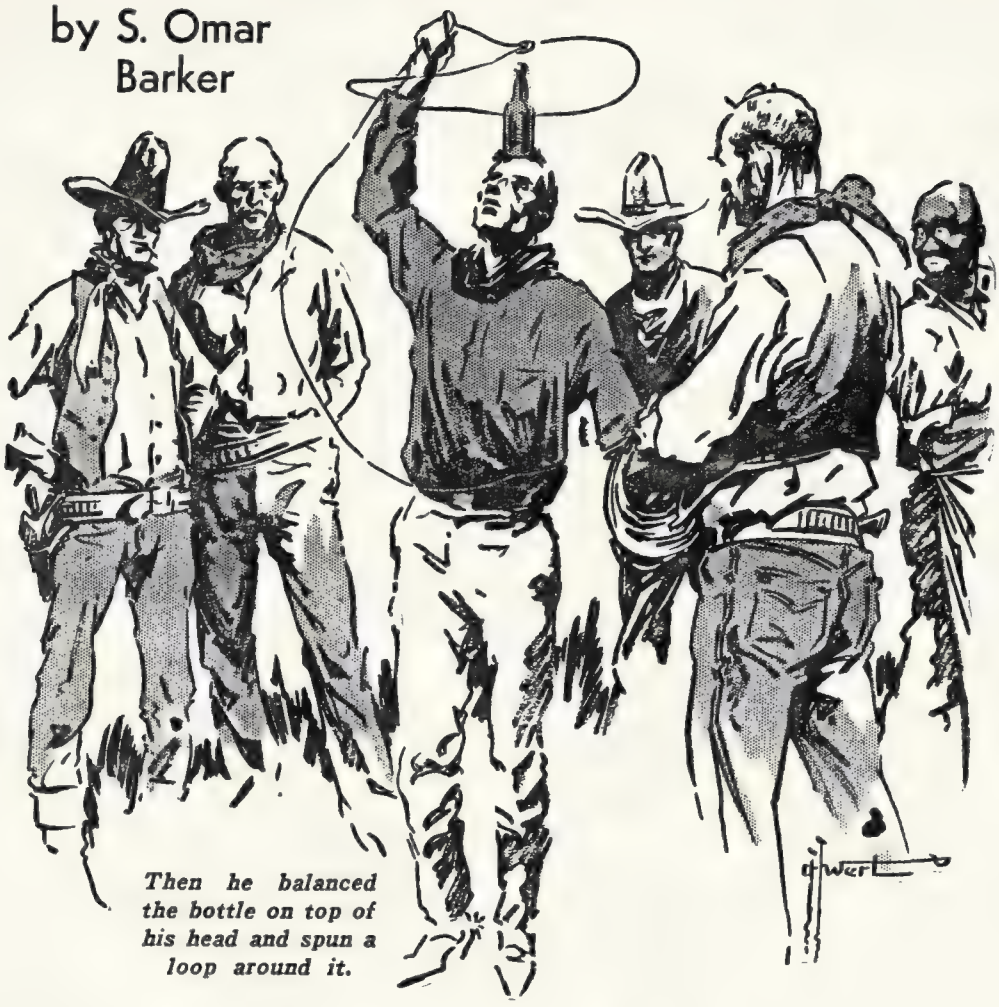
"I'll be goin'." The sheriff arose.

"Wait, we'll all be goin'."

"I know the way." Billy regarded them sternly. "You birds stay here and guard the prisoner, what's left of the bank, an' the town. Ain't you got no public spirit? I'm sheriff, and I deppitize you."

Contentedly he rode off into the night.

by S. Omar Barker



Then he balanced the bottle on top of his head and spun a loop around it.

4 of a Kind

BILL MAGLONE, stranger to this New Mexico range across which he rode, drew rein, removed the gold star—official badge of a far-away county in Texas—from his jacket and pinned it to the silk lining inside the crown of his thirty-dollar hat. From the draw beyond the next low ridge rose the thin blue smoke of a camp fire, and there came to Bill's ears, from the same spot, the sound of a man whistling.

No ordinary whistling, that. Somebody was cutting loose expertly on that old favorite song about "Sweet Hallie, in the valley—and the mocking bird still singing where she lies." The present whistler was putting in trills and tremolos that the mocking bird itself might have envied.

Bill Maglone's lean, humorous face broke open in a wide grin. It had been a longish trail. Pretty soon, now, it should end.

"Once a whistler, always a whistler," he remarked to the great open spaces. "Dollars to doughnut holes that's him!"

When Bill slanted down to the Half-a-Wheel wagon in the draw, a few minutes later, the whistling had stopped.

It was a slack Sunday on the Half-a-Wheel round-up. Four cowboys and a black cook were busily engaged with their Sunday "fidoodlin'" around the wagon. One was washing a shirt in a dish pan; one was doing what he could for an old pair of boots with rawhide thongs and a leather punch; one heel-squatted beside a saddle, mending a stirrup; the fourth was playing pitch with the cook. This one got up as the stranger rode near.

Without seeming to, Bill eyed him keenly, noting that he was of medium height, lean but muscular at around a hundred and sixty pounds, about thirty years old. The forelock of hair showing under his pushed-back hat was an ordinary light-brown, and the eyes that met his with inquiring friendliness were a little on the gray side of blue.

"Howdy, stranger!" The voice was neither too cordial nor sharp. "Light an' rest your saddle. Rode far?"

"Howdy! No; not too far," replied Bill in his easy, quiet voice. "But I could stand to get down a while. Them that knows me calls me Bill Maglone."

He swung down and stuck out his hand.

"I go by kinder of an Irish name myself." The Half-a-Wheel cowboy grinned. "Tuck Schmidt, if you don't stutter. Meet my wild bunch, Maglone. Tom Wilson, runnin' the laundry there; this here's Tip Baker; that 'un yonder calls hisself Toots McGaffey when he's sober. The dark night in the apron there, he's Mr. Goodpasture, the cook—Dingo for short. Boys, meet Bill Maglone."

They gave him their "howdies" all around. Bill managed to keep all expression of his rather amazed puzzlement from showing in his face.

There was not a tall man, nor a short one, among them. They were all, Foreman Schmidt included, of medium height, leanly muscled, at around one hundred sixty pounds, and if you wanted to guess ages, one guess might do for them all. Four blue-eyed, brown-haired men—except that two were a little bald.

Not that they actually looked alike; just the same type, that was all. If there was a wanted man among them, with no more than the usual superficial description to go by, it would be hard choosing.

Bill Maglone grinned. "Tuck, Tom, Tip, an' Toots!" He laughed. "Regular T party, ain't it? Now if you was only all from Texas, to make it complete——"

"Good guesser, ain't you?" The man called Tom Wilson chuckled. "We are—some time or other, or, anyhow, we claim to be. O' course this feller, his real name's Reginald, but already bein' three of us spelled with a capital T, we jest called him Toots to total up the T party, like you say. Quite a wrinkle, ain't it?"

"Sure is," Bill agreed. "But I reckoned maybe 'Toots' stood for some kind of musical ability or something. Didn't I hear somebody whistlin' mighty purty as I come over the hill?"

"Oh, that!" said "Toots" McGaffey, returning to his saddle mending. "Yeah; I reckon I was kinder blow-

in' the breakfast outa my teeth. You like whistlin', Maglone?"

"Well," said Bill, "I'll admit that any cowboy that can make the mockin' bird warble like that does kinder interest me. Ain't many can do it."

BILL'S sharp eyes searched the face of Toots McGaffey keenly. Was this the man that old Lon Wheeler's dying statement had sent him to find—and bring back to Texas?

"He's a whistlin' fool," old Lon had said, giving him what scanty description he could from but one day's acquaintance with this man who had left Texas in a hurry, accused of robbery and murder. "On that 'Sweet Hallie' tune, he's got the mockin' birds beat forty ways."

There had been other items, too, in that description—things Lon Wheeler had noticed that one afternoon and night in the Big Star Saloon at Lampasas nearly ten years back. And six years ago, old Wheeler said, some wandering puncher had mentioned seeing such a whistling cowboy with the Half-a-Wheel spread up here in New Mexico—but he didn't know what name he was going under.

Certainly it wasn't "Chick" Steed—the name that rollicking young buckarooster stranger had given at the Big Star that long-ago day before he had pulled out with a posse on his trail. But of course he would be going under an alias.

Bill Maglone hesitated. His mission was too important to risk mistakes. Yet here was a "whistlin' fool——"

Bill stepped toward the man mending the saddle. "McGaffey," he said, "I——"

He broke off suddenly. From over by the cook fire there arose, all at once, the opening bars of "Sweet Hallie," trilled and tremoloed to beat a piccolo. With an effort Bill kept back his surprise. The man whistling was "Dingo" Goodpasture, the black cook.

Toots McGaffey looked up at the young stranger, batting his eyes.

"What was you sayin', Maglone?"

The young cowboy detective from Texas chuckled. "Why," he said, "I was jest aimin' to ask if you wouldn't whistle me that 'Sweet Hallie' tune ag'in, but it looks like I don't need to. Brother, that ol' black coosie is shore cuttin' it off, ain't he?"

"You like it?" Foreman "Tuck" Schmidt grinned at him genially. Then he licked his lips. "Then jest listen to this! Hey, you, Tom an' Tip, wet up your lips!"

Bill Maglone's surprise was evident this time. He listened with his mouth wide open. For on the sunny morning air there now arose a concert, the like of which he had never heard—nor even heard of. Four white cowboys and a black cook were whistling "Sweet Hallie" together.

Not just plain whistling, either, for the melodious, rounded notes of the expert whistler were issuing in mellow harmony from all five pairs of lips. The man he sought was "a whistlin' fool"—and here were five of 'em, all in one bunch!

"At least," thought Bill Maglone, inwardly amused at his own bafflement, "I can count out Mr. Goodpasture."

"How you-all lak de Tootin' Two-Lip Orchistry, boss?" the black man asked when they had finished the piece.

"Damn if I ever heard the like!" said Bill, and meant it. "It shore was purty. You right sure this ain't

a vaudeville team in disguise instead of a cow outfit?"

Old Dingo Goodpasture chuckled, and the four cowboys grinned.

"Anybody kin learn whistlin' like that," offered "Tip" Baker, in explanation, "if he jest sets his mind to it—an' don't ruin his lips suckin' aigs. I reckon we-all jest made up our minds not to let no ol' three-toothed darky do anything we couldn't, so we jest bowed our necks an' learned to whistle, stranger. You'd be surprised how much bemusement we get out of it."

Bill wondered if some of their "bemusement," right now, wasn't at his expense. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask, casually, how long they'd been able to shame the mocking birds like that, but he changed his mind. If one of them was indeed Chick Steed, too many questions might make the man suspicious. There might be other ways to pick his man—by biding his time.

THE BLACK COOK ladled out a mighty fine dinner, and Bill Maglone ate heartily. He made no mention, as they ate, of his business, nor where he came from, nor where he was headed. And in accord with the accepted courtesy code of the cow camp, his hosts asked him no questions. They talked, casually, in friendly tones, of grass, of shortage of rains, of cattle prices, of horses—all the common, ranchy talk that cowhands find of interest.

After dinner, lolling at ease against one end of Tom Wilson's bed roll, Bill rolled some tobacco into a slim brown pill and half closed his eyes as he smoked it. He seemed—almost—to doze, but his mind was alert and busy.

At last he spoke, casually:

"I hear you got a rodeo comin' off next week over at Tucumcari," he said. "You reckon they got their trick ropers already signed up?"

"Why, I dunno," replied Tuck. "Seems to me like I heard they aim to make the trick ropin' a contest. You do some trick ropin', Maglone?"

Bill grinned. At least the first toss of this bait hadn't spooked them any. He had the subject neatly introduced, anyhow.

"I ain't bad," he admitted. "Maybe," he went on after a pause, "if I'd spin a few, you gents could give me an idee whether I'd be plumb outa my class at Tucum. Ary one of you got a piece of cotton line layin' around I could use?"

Maglone watched their faces keenly, without seeming to. He saw Tip Baker start to speak, then change his mind. But Foreman Schmidt spoke up at once.

"You might lend him yours, Tip," he said. He turned to the stranger again. "Tip does a little loop spinnin', his own self," he explained.

"Damned little!" Tip grunted.

But he opened up his bed roll and brought out a length of the soft, clothesline-type of rope used by ropers for spinning small, trick loops.

"Much obliged," said Maglone. He jerked a loop into it and gave it a tentative little spin.

"Don't reckon I could scare up a little matched spinnin' with ary one of you boys—say for about two bucks—could I?"

He looked at Tip challengingly. His tone was deliberately boastful.

But Tip shook his head. "I'm plumb outa practice," he said.

"Go on, Tip!" urged Toots. "I'll put up a buck on you. Don't let no braggin' stranger bluff you."

"Braggin' hell!" exclaimed Maglone sharply. "I'll show——"

"*Bueno!*" Tip Baker got sud-

denly to his feet. "You feel thataway about it, let's make it five, an' you be the judge. Spin your twine, stranger!"

Maglone noted that his boastful attitude had not been in vain. This Tip Baker had his dander up. About ten years ago the loafers in the Big Star Saloon at Lampasas, Texas, had "set up an' took notice" of the trick rope spinning, as well as the whistling, of a rollicking, roistering, *muy bravo* young stranger who said his name was Chick Steed.

That was before the Big Star proprietor had been found, toward morning, shot to death behind his own bar, his safe looted, and Lon Wheeler, then a bartender, crumpled on the floor, apparently unconscious from a blow on the head. It was this stranger, this Chick Steed, Wheeler had said when he came to, who had done both the killing and the robbery, knocking him out for good measure.

Now, Maglone believed, one of these four men was Chick Steed, whom he had been sent to find. And apparently this one who went by the name of Tip Baker was a trick roper. Yet he had hesitated to admit it.

"Twirl your loop, stranger!" Foreman Schmidt's voice was not unfriendly, but it was a little sharp. "I've got five that says Tip'll outspin you, ever' loop!"

Bill Maglone was no professional trick roper, but he was no slouch at it, either. He started a little loop, six inches across, gradually grew it to six feet, swapped hands on it, passed the hold between his legs, skipped it near the ground, and finally brought it down again to a small loop, circling the hat on his head. He "walked" it alternately up and down his arms.

"Beat that, cowboy!" he taunted when he had finished.

THE FOUR Half-a-Wheel punchers applauded, but they also grinned —and with reason. For, compared to Tip Baker, Maglone was a rope-spinning amateur.

The cowboy detective watched him with growing satisfaction. He spun three loops at once—one in each hand and one in his teeth. He asked Maglone to stand beside him and then circled them both with a big loop, and at the same time he reached up with the other hand to twirl a small one about the crown of Maglone's hat.

But Maglone was tall. The reach was too great. The hat-loop wabbled, struck the hat and knocked it off. As it tumbled to the ground, Maglone's eyes caught the glint of sun on the gold star pinned up in the crown.

Foreman Schmidt stepped over quickly, picked up the hat, and returned it to him. Maglone thought there was a queer gleam in his eyes, maybe a gleam of suspicion; but if any of them had noted the star, they gave no further sign of it.

To finish his performance, Tip tilted a long-necked bottle to his lips with his left hand and, while he drank from it, spun a tiny loop around it.

Maglone's pulses quickened. That stunt had been Chick Steed's, ten years ago, in the Big Star Saloon.

The man who called himself Tip Baker jerked in his loop, stopped, stood grinning.

"Pay me, stranger?" he inquired, half mockingly.

Maglone dropped his new rolled smoke, unlighted. "I reckon that tells the tale, cowboy," he began. "You're——"

It was on his tongue tip to say

"Chick Steed," and he was ready for whatever action that statement might bring. But Tom Wilson had suddenly come to his feet.

"Hell!" he broke in, seizing the rope and bottle out of Tip's hands. "Let *me* show you somethin'!"

The rope grew suddenly to a loop in his agile fingers. He held the bottle up to his mouth, and quickly, easily, duplicated the stunt Tip had just performed. Then he balanced the bottle on top of his head and spun a tiny loop around it there.

Then, almost before Maglone realized it, both Tuck Schmidt and Toots McGaffey were up on their feet, also twirling ropes. The black cook stood by, grinning.

"Ain't dey de rope-twullin' fools, mistuh?" he inquired. "An' evuh one of 'em jest a leetle mite bettuh dan de nex'!"

Four middle-sized, middling-blond cowboys, all claiming to hail from Texas, all expert whistlers, all top-notch trick ropers——

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Bill ruefully, as he paid his bet. "You four chicks all pip outa the same egg, or what?"

Plainly the Half-a-Wheel cowboys were getting a kick out of his amazement.

"Chicks, hell!" snorted Toots. "This here's an outfit of ol' hoot-owl roosters, stranger!"

"I like to have boys around me that can do somethin' besides tend cows," the foreman explained. "Makes life more interestin', Maglone."

"And safer," thought Bill, "if one of you happens to be a wanted man."

But aloud he said, faking a sneer: "I s'pose you're all tomcats with a six-gun, too, eh?"

They were. Quite agreeably they took turns demonstrating. One at a time they shot a loose cork out of the top of a bottle at twenty paces, and only the foreman even nicked the glass slightly.

That, too, was one of the show-off stunts young Chick Steed had pulled in the Big Star Saloon that evening before the murder. Bill Maglone was no longer amazed. His belief had grown to a certainty that one of these men was that same Chick Steed. But for reasons of his own he wanted to be reasonably sure which one before he spoke his little piece.

"I'll take a shot at that bottle, my own self," he said. "Stand clear!"

Bill aimed, fired—and missed He scowled, swore under his breath—and missed four more. With a show of anger he threw his gun into the grass clump where his saddle lay. He turned back to see the man called Toots McGaffey grinning at him.

"Maybe," Toots chuckled, razzing him, "ol' Dingo'll lend you a dish pan to practice on, stranger."

IT WAS good-natured razzing, and the cowboy detective knew it; nothing to get mad about. Besides, he was a guest at their camp.

But suddenly Bill's clear eyes darkened. He stepped deliberately toward Toots, stood not a yard from him, his feet wide apart, his fists clenched.

"You've got a rough tongue, cowboy," he said stiffly, "an' I don't like it!"

His right hand flashed up, suddenly, and his open hand slapped the other cowboy none too gently across the mouth.

Toots took one backward step, his face blank with surprise. "Damn your gizzard!" he exclaimed and came at him.

Bill side-stepped the rush neatly,

stuck out his foot, grabbed the man's shirt at the shoulder as he tripped, and flung him to the ground. His right hand, open-palmed, smacked like a pistol shot on the seat of Toots McGaffey's trousers. His keen eyes watched McGaffey's face intently as he got up. The corners of the man's mouth were pulled down into tight, twisty lines of rage. He got up cursing. Maglone braced himself for the rush.

But it did not come. Swift as a cat, Tuck Schmidt stepped up and seized McGaffey, holding him back. At the same instant Tom Wilson stepped in front of the stranger, his gun in his hand.

"Easy, here!" said Tuck quietly.

"What the hell do you mean, feller?" Tom Wilson growled. "Startin' a ruckus over nothin'?"

"Throw down that gun," Maglone snapped back sharply, "An' I'll show you!"

"You've bought you a battle!" Tom said it with tight, straight lips. "Jest let me handle him, boys!"

Deliberately he tossed his gun to one side. He made no mad rush, as Toots had. His lips stayed closed in a tight, cold line. His blue eyes gleamed coldly. Without preliminaries, he feinted with his right and stepped in.

Maglone, his eyes intent on the man's face, took the wallop a hand's width above the belt. It knocked a grunt out of him. But his answering punch cut through Wilson's defense like a bullet. His head snapped back, and the follow-up cracked like a hammer to his chin. Tom grunted and went down.

Bill Maglone stepped back. He smiled thinly. His eyes snapped swift challenge at the man called Tip Baker and drew a quick answer. Tip Baker threw down his gun. He hunched his shoulders heavily and advanced with a scowl on his face.

"Get outa the way, Toots!" he rumbled, the words growling deep in his throat. And then, to Maglone: "You've choosed you the wrong man this time, stranger."

"Come ahead!" Maglone snapped the words at him, one eye upon the foreman.

Apparently Schmidt caught the challenge of that look. He stepped between the two men, as one with authority.

"Hold your hosses, Tip," he said quietly. Then to Maglone: "I don't see no call for this kind o' doin's, Maglone. Maybe you better get your hoss saddled—an' drift."

"Maybe," said Bill Maglone with a deliberate insolence, "you'd like to make me!"

"Why, I reckon I might!"

The foreman's right fist flashed up, fast and hard; too fast to be dodged entirely, and hard enough that Maglone almost instantly felt his right eye begin to swell. Automatically, then, with expert speed and precision, Maglone's fists went to work. One of them found its mark. Blood began to trickle from Tuck Schmidt's nose. But Maglone saw that the man's face showed neither pain nor rage nor fear. His blue eyes were wide open, coldly calm, and he was smiling.

"Here! Wait a minute!" Maglone began. "You're the man I——"

But the foreman was not waiting. He still smiled, but he fought, too. In spite of superior reach and skill and speed, Maglone had his hands full. He took a wallop to the ribs that whitened him for want of breath. There was no time for words now. His right eye was swiftly swelling shut. But with his left he could still see Tuck Schmidt's mild face, smiling.

He got in a one-two pair of wal-

lops to the foreman's chin that took him down to his knees, but the smile stayed on.

Suddenly, at this chance, Bill leaped back.

"Hold it, Schmidt!" he cried. "You're Chick Steed! The man I've come to——"

Before he could finish, he saw Toots McGaffey running to the foreman as he rose, bringing him his gun. Tip was looking at the star in the crown of Maglone's hat that he had just picked up. He dropped it and turned to where he had tossed his empty gun. Tom Wilson was groggily crawling after his.

MAGLONE had not meant to bring this business to the point of gun play, but apparently he had. With the speed of a scared coyote he leaped for Toots, somehow clamped strong fingers onto the gun he was bringing to his boss, and yanked it from him. He whirled, holding it steady in his hand, slowly backing up to cover them all.

"Take it easy, boys! Hold it, now—an' listen to me! I come up here from Lampasas lookin' for a man named Chick Steed. Now that I've found him, I'm free to tell you that —— *Whoomsh!*"

Wielded from behind him, a wet gunny sack suddenly plopped down upon Detective Maglone's head.

"Ah got 'im, boys!" hollered Mr. Dingo Goodpasture. "Same way I catch rabbits! Come he'p me hold 'im!"

They came—and they held him. But they also unsmothered him from the wet gunny sack.

The foreman stood before him, still smiling faintly.

"All right, Maglone," he said. "You come here from Lampasas, lookin' for a feller named Chick Steed. Well, quick as we get your hoss saddled, you can set out back, an' tell 'em that you learned Chick Steed wasn't goin' back to Lampasas, after ten years, to face trial for a murder an' a robbery he didn't commit. Is that plain?"

"Why, yes, kinder," replied Bill, grinning. "Is this? A purty rich ol' feller named Lon Wheeler died at Lampasas last month. Got his start as a bartender some years back. Got it crooked—by murderin' his boss, robbin' the safe, knockin' hisself on the head, an' blamin' the whole business onto a wanderin' young cowboy cut-up who didn't have sense enough not to run off. So now when Wheeler sees his time has come, he busts down an' confesses, an' he wills all he's got to this young cowboy, an' leaves me the job of findin' him. He's supposed to be of medium height, middlin' blond, blue-eyed, around one hundred sixty pounds—by now—somewheres near thirty years old, a whistlin' fool on that 'Sweet Hallie' song, a whiz with a spinnin' rope, an' able to shoot the cork out of a whisky bottle at twenty steps without battin' an eye.

"You'd think that was plenty of clues—but what do I find? I find this here Chick Steed has made him up a new name, got to be a foreman, an' been smart enough to hire his cowboys all about the same size an' description as himself, teach 'em all to be whistlin' fools—includin' the cook—learn 'em all his own ropin' an' shootin' tricks.

"He figgers them is the things he had done that wild day at Lampasas, so anybody that comes lookin' for him'll be watchin' out for such, but with four of you performin' thataway, how the hell will anybody know which from tother? Am I a good guesser, Mr. Foreman Tuck

Schmidt Chick Steed, for a man with one eye swoll shut, or ain't I?"

The foreman grinned, wiping the dried blood from his nose.

"Sounds reasonable, Maglone," he said. "But since it was good news you was bringin', whyn't you speak right out an' ask for Chick Steed?"

"Yeah? An' maybe have the wrong man—or maybe all four—claimin' to be him? Nossir; I had to find out first. So—well, it cost me some bruised ribs an' a black eye, boys, but——"

"How the hell?"

Four cowboys and the black cook plainly showed their puzzlement.

"I don't get it yet, Maglone," said the foreman. "Supposin' I tell you I ain't Chick Steed, after all? What would you say to that?"

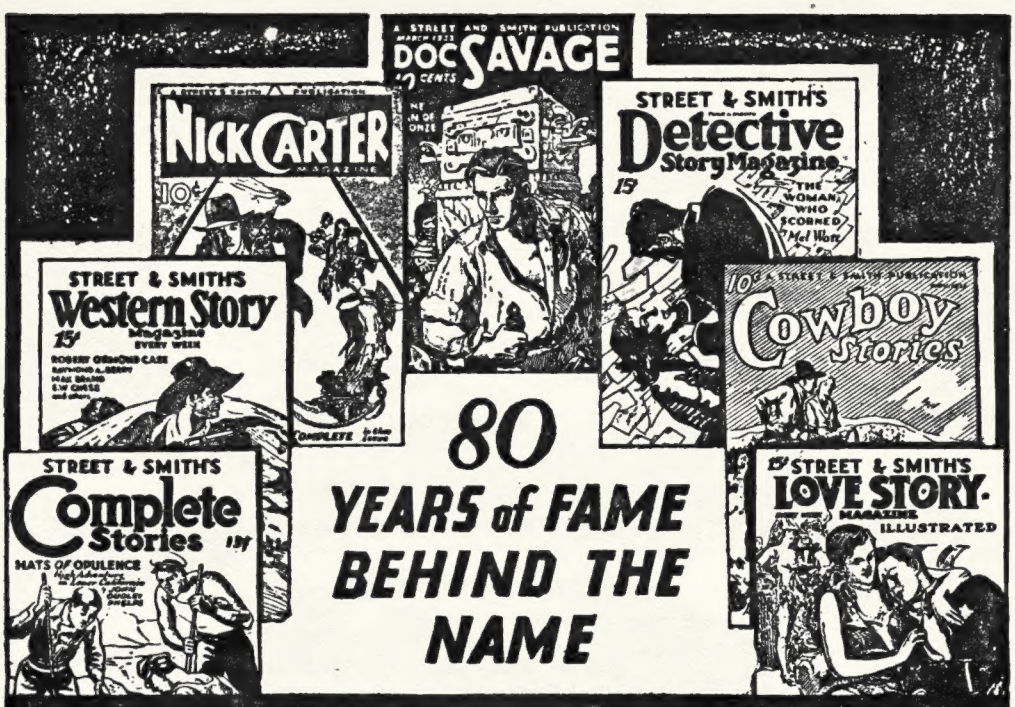
"If you won't take it for fightin' talk," answered Bill Maglone, with a wry grin, "I'd say you're a liar! You see, Mr. Foreman Tuck Schmidt Chick Steed, you done some fist fightin' that day in Lampasas, too. An' ol' Lon Wheeler see it. He noticed somethin' you done when you fought that not one man in a thousand ever does. So when I'd done used up all my other identification clues without provin' nothin', I jest natcherly had to stir up a fight. Much obliged to you boys for takin' me one at a time, an' not gunnin' me, too."

"Wasn't foh me an' mah ol' rabbit sack," broke in the black cook, "dey would 'a' been some gunnin', suh, an'—an'——"

"Maybe," said Maglone. "Maybe not. Point now is, how soon will you be ready to start back to Texas with me to claim all that money ol' Lon Wheeler left you, Schmidt—I mean Steed?"

"Why"—the Half-a-Wheel foreman smiled—"this New Mexico climate seems to suit my whistlin' purty good, Maglone. This Wheeler's money growed from a crooked start. To hell with it! Let 'em give it to charity; or endow a whistlin' college. Me, I'm stayin' here—with my mockin' birds."

Bill Maglone grinned and put out his hand. "Spoke," he said, "like a man! Like a man, I might say, that smiles when he fights."



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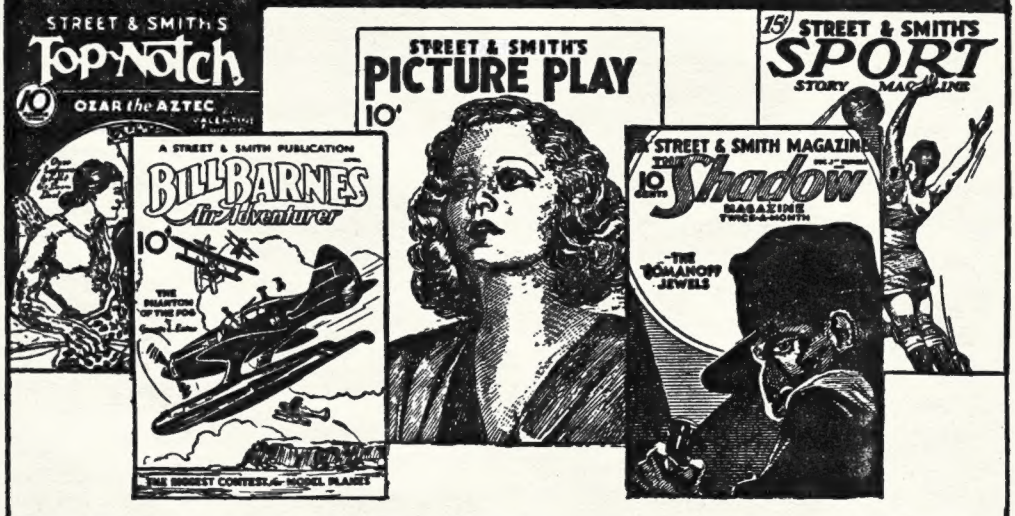

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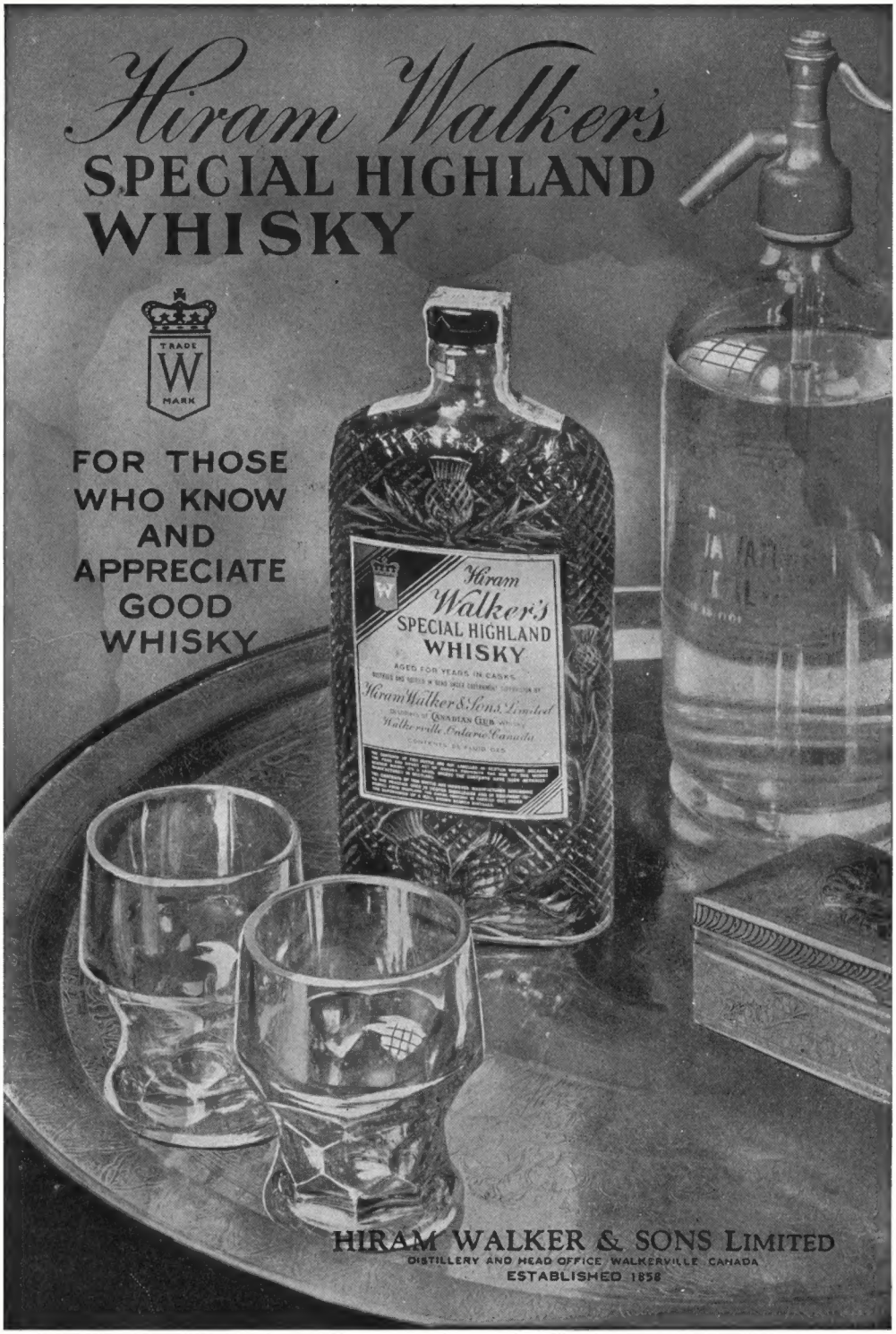
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